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THE VILLAGE BOOK

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Dandelion Days
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The Pathway

Nature Books

The Lone Swallows
The Peregrine's Saga
The Old Stag
Tarka the Otter

War Books

The Wet Flanders Plain
The Patriot's Progress, in collaboration with William Kermode, the author of the 110 Lino-cuts.

In Preparation Sequel to 'The Village Book'

The Labouring Life, which continues *The Spirit of the Village* and *The Air and Light of the Fields and the Sea* through Summer and Autumn, and ends with the long descriptive comedy, *Cemetery or Burial Ground*

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Williamson on his threshold, in the brilliant sun of drought, 1921, described at the beginning of Billy Goldsworthy's Barn. The cat-hole is seen low in the door ; once the cottage was a barn. The spaniels were brothers ; the right-hand dog was ' Old Bill ' who lived until February, 1930, when he was ' done away with ' for 2s. 6d., being too full of misery, canker, and suffering at the decline of walks and his master's care.

942:3513

THE VILLAGE BOOK

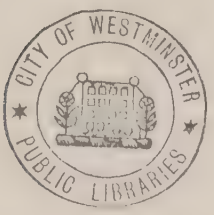
BY

HENRY WILLIAMSON

'If you want good neighbours, you must first be a good neighbour yourself' –

Old Ploughman of Ham at the Rabbit Supper

Illustrated, twice only, by sketches from the original MS.



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THE VILLAGE BOOK

which
covers a writing-period
of nine years (1921-1930)
is
an imaginative work which should not be read as the history of any particular village, and certainly not of any man or woman. Even the 'I' and the 'zur' and the 'Mr. Williamson' of certain pages, such as those describing the quarrel between the fictitious Zeale brothers,
are but devices of story-telling.
Now in gratitude for much help and encouragement, the pages of Field-air and Sea-light are dedicated with love and respect to the great-grandmother of Windles, John, Baby Margaret
MRS. HIBBERT
And with equal amity the village
pages are given to our
old striding friend of
the Sussex Downs
PETRE MAIS

THE DONKEY

A SUDDEN loud braying outside the cottage, a light rapid clicking of small iron shoes cantering on the road, a glimpse of an old man running down the wet muddy lane, holding a bowler hat on his head with one hand, and the other clinging to a rope fastened round a donkey's neck – we run into the sunshine, my son and I, to see the donkey drawing its master round the village.

There is laughter outside the gate, repeated braying, and grey thin legs being kicked into the air.

'Jgee-jgee' lisps the baby on my shoulder.

'Don-key,' I correct him.

'Jgee-jgee!' he says.

'Don-*kee*,' I say again, pointing. He stares at it, then points, gurgles, hesitates, and 'Jgee-jgee!' he declares.

'Baby Wee can't say it,' a tacker of five years informs me. In Ham small boys are called 'tackers.'

'Mind the donkey doesn't kick you,' I reply.

'Gitoom!' he scoffs. 'I ban't afraid of that li'l old donkey!'

'Jgee-jgee,' lisps Baby Wee. It isn't his real name, of course, but the children call him Baby Wee. Nor

is my real name 'Daddy Wee'; but there, in genial moments I have acknowledged it.

How old is this riotous donkey enjoying the sunshine? To me, it seems ageless. Long after it is dead, if it ever dies, the donkey will be remembered; already its memorials are on the walls of half the cottages in the village. Master is a builder, and many thousands of the donkey's hairs have gone into the mixing of the mortar. You can always tell when master is going to build or repair, by the hair he pulls out of his donkey.

If that little aged grey beast, now being exercised after a week or more in the dark shed that is its winter stable, could but speak! It would tell of night journeys for loads of hay from stacks in this and that field (not master's): of bundles of bean sticks cut from the wood in the distant valley (not master's): of building stones taken from this or that quarry (not master's): of gravel from the heaps by this or that house being built (not master's): of master's advice to his sons that 'Good work on cottages (not master's) is the decay of labour': of slates being broken as they were nailed to the rafter battens (not master's): of eggs being taken from hen-houses (not master's): of old people being turned out of cottages they had lived in all their lives – cottages bought by master or his industrious son, to be rebuilt with the £260 subsidy money after the war, and to be let for £40 a year: of master's well-known record of once charging sixteen

people for sixteen quarter-days of work in one day.

And best of all, the donkey would tell the story of master's fortune, which was, literally, founded on bones. Young master was building a glass-house for a gennulman, and half a ton of bones were to be buried under it as nourishment for the vines. The donkey drew the bones there in the worm-eaten cart, from the town eight miles away, and master buried them in the light of day, and received his price; and they went back again, and master dug up the bones in the darkness of night, and hid them, and sold them to someone else. That was some time during the last century.

Master turns his handsome old face, with its flowing white beard, and speaks amiably to the baby. 'Be 'ee going to put th'old donkey in that village book they tell about?' he asks me. I tell him I am revising what I have been writing about village life, and that if it is to last, my book must be as true as I can make and think it.

'Jgee-jgee,' says my son, staring raptly at the donkey – his idea of truth.

'Ah, there be only one Book that matters,' replies the old man, handsome as Moses. 'That's the only truth that lasts, midear!'

'There are so many interpretations of even that one Book,' I murmur, with sideway glance at the white beard. 'Which is the right one?' And it seemed to me that the donkey would say, if only from force of habit, 'Not master's'.

THE BADGER DIG

On St. Valentine's Day I was walking with my spaniel on the high down above the Atlantic. A mile away the sea was grey and troubled. Lundy arose vaguely out of the mist of the night's storm. I could see the headland over my shoulder, in the line of the wind, its brown and green fields divided by dark lines that were stone-ditched banks, topped with ragged furze and thorns, some cut and laid under sods. The distant headland was like a dead animal lying on its side, the green flanks sunken on the hidden frame.

Along the uneven line of dark cliffs under the fields rose white bursts of waves along its length, recalling to my mind a preliminary bombardment of the Hindenburg Line seen from the high ground above St. Leger five springtimes since. Over the westward point I saw a flock of wheeling seagulls; probably a trapper was at work along one of the hedges, and they were crying out against his presence. I could well imagine the wild wailing and cries as of insanity that these birds make in early spring, when they have chosen their nesting

sites; but now the wind thrumming in my ears was the only sound.

Suddenly my spaniel, who had been hunting rabbits in a patch of brake fern in a corner of the stony field, began to yelp in distress. The yelp changed to an agony of howling; I could see him rolling and leaping in the bracken. He had put his foot on the iron plate of a rabbit gin, and the steel serrated jaws had snapped up, and now held his paw. He would not keep still while I tried to release him. He twisted and leapt, biting the iron spring, and the chain fastening it to the ground. I shouted encouragement to him, and he lay down for a moment, but the pain and the fear, the frenzy of being held by something he could not understand, were stronger than the voice of his master. The spring was too strong to be depressed by my hand, so I stood on it; while he snapped at my hands, each snap ending abruptly in but a graze of my fingers; he would not bite me. Putting all my weight on one foot I pressed down the spring, the jaws loosened, and he was free, barking and gurgling with delight, jumping up and licking the hand he had almost bitten.

His voice was low, with numberless subtle inflexions. He had many thoughts, which he could not express; he was incoherent and hysterical. He looked at me, straining to speak with his lips and tongue; but his mouth was large and slobbery, his tongue only fit to lap with, and to perspire

through; his teeth were too primitive for conversation. A fine head for holding a rabbit, with its long jaws and white ivory teeth: and I thought as the gentle creature told his love for me that one day in the future his descendants would be able to talk. The thoughts were there, some of them inherited from generations of ancestors faithful to men; others taken in from impressions of myself, a further layer stored in the remote mind-cupboard. For man may pass on to others the fine traits that are the heritage of his long and struggling evolution: this was true of his fellows especially, and, I thought as I walked along the high down, it was true in various degrees throughout the realms of all life where intelligence and reasoning had been alchemized from instinct – which was made by habit founded on adaptation.

The wind rushed past us, shaking the dry skeletons of the thistles in the stony field, trembling the carlines – so loved by the goldfinches – the dry grasses, the white and brittle charlock frames. From each it drew a sound; a whistle, a sibilance, a sigh, a keening noise. On the ground, where during the past summer the charlock had risen in legions with the oaten stems, small fern-like leaves were grey and shrivelled; these were the dead silverweeds, whose yellow sensitive flowers had throbbed to the sun, and closed in shadow. I looked for a blossom, a sign of growing plant life, but there was nothing. I must wait: the time was not yet. For the time of

year before the early spring had been hard and sunless, with frosts at night and icy ocean winds. Some years it is a mild period, with hot sunshine and warm rain, when stray burnet roses bloom on the sandy terraces below, primroses and celandines open under the thorns on the hedges, and larks sing with April fervours.

There were great rainclouds in the sky, seeming from the top of the down to be hanging lower than myself; they drifted above the scores of strip-like fields which lay behind me. Where the plough was at work the fields were dark brown, and seabirds were grey specks in the new hair-like furrows. Miles behind me, to the south, and now dim in the mist, an expanse of sand dunes and reclaimed marsh stretched flat to the estuary; and across the estuary the spray of the high-tide breakers rose like smoke off the Pebble Ridge. The sun was shining there in the gold, breaker-blown vapour. Nearer, as I watched, the headland fields glowed with a beautiful luminous green; and then were shut off from my sight as by a grey lattice blind, where the rain was falling.

I walked onwards in a northerly direction, so that the rain-wind from the south-west cut over my left shoulder. Beside one of the stone hedges, on which bent thorns grew with grey lichens fastened on them, a man was standing, knocking iron with a hammer. He was a trapper, who rented the trapping rights from the farmer, paying for them

by a number of weeks' labouring in the summer. He had a sack containing gins and pegs. Talking with him, I learned that the Badger Digging Club was meeting just over the brow of the hill that morning. I left him to his gin-tilling, and walked with the wind behind me to the higher hill in front. Suddenly a valley opened before me. Fields seen across the valley, small under the sky, were square, three-sided, and in long strips cut up by dark lines of bank and hedge. Down one field, moving slowly in the distance, was a trickle of black specks and tinier white specks – the men and terriers of the Badger Digging Club walking down the hillside.

Very slowly the trickling party crossed the valley, and climbed the hill. When they came near I saw that some of the men carried picks and shovels; one, with a nose once broken and re-set irregularly, carried a large basket of sandwiches and a gallon earthenware jar of whiskey. About twelve terriers, some of the rough-haired kind, were trotting on single and double leashes. In front walked a tall man in old fawn riding breeches, cloth leggings, a red waistcoat, tweed coat, white stock fastened by a pin made from a badger's penis bone. It resembled a two-inch length of quill. He wore a grey bowler hat. He was, as I soon learned, the Master of the Club. Just behind him walked a shorter man, the huntsman, dressed in the same style, but with a cloth cap. They were

friends. Like the Master, the huntsman wore a red waistcoat with brass buttons engraved with the hunt initials.

The meet had taken place on the road a mile away. The hunt, when first I had viewed it, was moving to the badger's earth, about fifty yards from where I was standing with my excited spaniel. It was tunnelled in a small brake of blackthorn, elderberry, gorse and bramble. Here the peaceful badgers had lived for many years, slowly digging their corridors and relining sleeping chambers with moss, grass and bracken. By day they slept, coming out at night to seek food, usually following the same tracks or paths down hedge and ditch.

Fantastic stories have been written about the savagery of brock – *grey* is another name for the badger appearing in seventeenth century parish records against sums of 4d. being paid for its death, – and his habits of stealing hens, sucking pigs and even the milk of cows; but the badger does little harm. Sometimes in a field of corn his passing or playful rolling will press down many stalks; but no one in the village inns, when I asked, had heard of any harm being done by a badger. Brock goes his peaceful way, digging roots and taking berries, worms, slugs, beetles and mice; if he scents a nest of young rabbits in a bury he will dig them out and eat them. Wasp grubs he likes, and will soon discover the comb with scrapings of curved, black, bear-like claws. When lumbering down a

hedge at night, he finds a rabbit in a gin, he will eat it or take it away. Gins and wires have been found in his earths; the badger is a strong digger, and soon digs up the iron peg that has been hammered into the ground.

Just before the brake the master and huntsman stopped. The innkeeper who had carried the food and drink put the basket on the grass and removed his cap to scratch his head. Terriers strained at the leash, yapping and howling. Some were shivering. The others walked up the hill, and stopped: a farmer and two labourers with digging tools; three small boys; an adolescent schoolgirl with flaxen hair, ruddy face, always smiling; her father, a small, natty-dressed, red-faced, long-nosed man who reminded me, vaguely, of a badger; and his wife, a brown-faced woman in tweeds. The master and huntsman, in their red waistcoats, scrambled up a mossy bank, and examined the entrance holes to the badgers' home.

My spaniel by this time was extremely excited, leaping up at me and telling me about the strange dogs and men. Fearing that the sportsmen would be annoyed by his presence, I took him fifty yards away and tied him to a stump of furze bush, and went to the badgers' earth. His howling mingled with the terriers' whining and the wild cries of gulls soaring over the hill.

The master was kneeling before a heap of earth outside a round tunnel about fourteen inches

across, and slanting down in darkness. He was looking for the marks of pads. He found a hair about two inches long. Twiddling it between forefinger and thumb, it was felt to be flat. He held it out for me to twiddle. It was silver for a quarter inch at the tapered end, then brown, in three shades scarcely discernible.

A yard outside the tunnel entrance two shallow pits had been scratched. The master stooped to examine them. They were the latrines. There were many beetle wing-covers. It was obvious that the earth was being used. He stood up, and said 'They're home. All right.' The spectators came up and crowded round. A terrier was slipped from leash, and crept down the pipe. On his knees the master kneeled and listened. He drew a copper horn from between the second and third button of his red waistcoat, pressed it against the side of his mouth, and blew three faint toots.

He heard a terrier snarl come from the darkness, and the thud of feet. Tally ho!

The huntsman cut a long bramble, stripped one end of thorns – the end he would handle – and when the terrier returned with red-frothed jaws he poked it down the pipe to find which way it was tunnelled. It ran west. The master ordered digging into the hill about two yards from the entrance. A ragged hairy man seized a pick and drove it into the turf. The master commanded everyone to get back as he lit a cigarette, and with

three toots of the copper horn encouraged a second terrier to enter the hole.

The terriers tied to various trees continued to howl into the cold wind, and men began to swing their arms to get warmth into them. Almost fiercely the strong, hairy labourer tore at the grass. For an hour the dog remained by the unseen badger, then it crept out, bitten on the shoulder and in the lower jaw. The wind blew a flake of bloody froth on the grey bowler of the master simultaneously with the ash of a man's cigarette. These marks, I noticed, remained to the end of the dig.

A terrier bitch was sent down, and the digging went on. I went to see my spaniel, and found him frantic with misery and joy. He implored to be released. Petting made him more frantic, so I left him yelling to the dull clouds his utter misery of being tied while some sport, immense and unknown, was going on without him.

The badger holes were on the slope of the hill, above a thorn brake. The blackthorns were spiny and leafless, but their buds were bound tight from the winter's cold. A magpie's nest, with the thorn-cover fallen in, was derelict in the centre of the brake. A mouse-like squeaking came from it as the wind swayed a stiff bough and rubbed it against a dry twig. Underneath, curving slightly, a path about nine inches wide was beaten through the scanty dead weeds and past the thin black-thorn trunks. It was the exit path of the badgers,

down which they had bundled in the dusk; had it been the return route, the effort of climbing up would have worn a more distinct path. A gorse bush near had two gold specks among its green prickles. I thought as they dug that it was eager for the sun to send the green south wind of spring, when its blossoms could multiply, even as the thoughts of man. The sow badger would have her little ones; and perhaps a bright-eyed kestrel would come to the old pie's nest in the thorns and lay her eggs. Swaling fires for the gorse, tongs and hunting knife for the badgers, gamekeeper's shot for the kestrel, loneliness for man; these are the ways of life. Yet endeavour goes on; all things aspire to the sun and the sky.

My habit of unfocussing my senses from the present made me forget the cold as I noticed blossom, nest, and badger path; but a hoarse burring voice over my shoulder asking me if I would care for a drink made me aware that the broken-nosed innkeeper was by my side. I went with him to the basket a few yards away, and in a thick glass he poured me nearly half a pint of brown whiskey.

The raw spirit was like sunlight on my throat. Soon the badger dig took on a jovial aspect. It was a survival of one of the oldest sports in Britain, going back to the time of the Normans, when the terriers, the earth-dogs, came over in the wooden galleys. The master came for a drink; he told me

with rage that someone recently had shot a badger near Lynton. Such a thing, he declared, was monstrous, when a postcard would have brought himself and terriers and diggers. He insisted, and he was sincere, that badgers would soon be exterminated were it not for the clubs; for where a club was in existence, generally no badgers were killed except by the club, and therefore a certain number would be left alive. I knew this was true of the wild red deer on Exmoor, which in summer did much damage to corn and root crops; but I did not know it was so with the badger. Also, declared the master, badger-digging improved the strain of terriers; the bravest dogs were sought after for breeding. Feeling the kick of the whiskey, I asked him if it improved the strain of badgers. He stared at me, after muttering something, and left me.

Noon came; and they were still digging with spade, two-bill, bar, pick and mattock. The hours rushed away with the wind into space. We ate our sandwiches, and various men took turns at digging. A terrier was below, a very fierce dog belonging to the innkeeper of the Lower House in the village of Ham, a rough-haired fox terrier that was a perfect badger dog. His name was Mad Mullah. He was so fierce that whenever he saw the stuffed masks, or heads of badgers, on the walls of the Lower House bar, he snarled and leapt up at them. It was not safe to take my emotional spaniel near him

when a badger mask was held out to the Mad Mullah. Once he flung him on his back, and straddled him with teeth bared at his quick-swallowing throat.

Now we could hear the Mad Mullah's ceaseless barks below, with the grunts of badgers, and scraping noises. Very shortly the shouts of the diggers caused everyone to crowd round, the master to implore more room, and the tethered dogs to whimper and yelp more furiously. A pick had broken into the pipe, and the tail of the Mad Mullah was seen. Picks were thrown down, and shovels taken in hand. Quickly the hole was enlarged. Suddenly the terrier backed out. The onlookers crushed back in panic, for a flat head shaped like a bear's, but no larger than that of a terrier, had appeared at the hole. It had black patches on its cheeks and through its eyes, and a white broad arrow running from nose to forehead and along both sides of its neck. It disappeared, and the terrier, with earthy hackles raised, dashed after it.

Very soon the hole was widened. The master, after many demands for space, all made in tones of the greatest exasperation, knelt down with a pair of tongs in his hands. These were made of iron, the handles being three feet long, and when closed round brock's neck the pincers formed a collar, or iron circle, which pinned him down. The terrier was pulled off by his master, struggling and snarling. It is the custom of some hunts to allow

terriers, especially untried dogs, to face the badgers held in the tongs. The bites, if any, are said not to harm it, as the hide of the back and shoulders is tough and nearly half an inch thick.

Handing the long tongs to the huntsman, the pale-faced master grasped the badger by its stumpy yellowish tail, and held it at arm's length. The captive made no attempt to bite or struggle. Its tiny pig-like eyes were fixed, its short legs spread, showing the squat body and yellowish-white underparts. With his knife the master scraped at a part of the suspended animal's body; and suddenly thrusting the knife under my nose, he explained that it was the scenting gland of the badger.

Someone held open the mouth of a sack, a little fearfully, lest the animal writhe sideways and bite him; but swung by its tail, the badger appeared to be helpless. Had a man's wrist been near its jaws, it might have bitten it through, making to meet the front and canine teeth of upper and lower jaw, and cracking, in the same bite, the bone with its hind teeth. The master, who addressed most of his remarks to me, then continued his lecture: the badger, he said, 'in proportion to its weight, has the most powerful neck and jaw muscle of any of the carnivora. It belongs to the same family as the stoat, the weasel, the otter, the ferret, and the rare polecat.' I thought it must have had very powerful jaws, for when I was a boy a ferret accidently caught in a gin one day bit through the knuckle

bone of one of my fingers, making its teeth meet four times in the space of two seconds or less; and the ferret did not weigh two pounds. The spring balance gave the badger's weight – it was the boar – as thirty and a half pounds, or more than fifteen times the weight of the ferret. I thought the master's lecture unknowledgeable, but said nothing.

The badger in the sack having been weighed, it was tied and thrown down. The hidden, curled-up shape was quiet. The fierce terrier was in the pipe again, engaging the sow badger. After a few minutes digging she was seen. The Mullah's muzzle was pink with blood and froth. The sow, heavy with young, was swift in her sudden lunges – much swifter than the dog. Round her neck the curved iron forceps met in a circle, and she was held. The master tailed her, and dropped her into another sack. He pushed back his hat and lit a cigarette with a shaky hand. Then he began to yell *Leu-leu-leu! Gar-gar-garn!* He and his huntsmen made other bloodthirsty cries. Then they drank more whiskey. Terriers howled and yelled. The badgers lay still in the sacks. Everyone seemed pleased with the sport. I went away to release the spaniel, who leapt up at me, distraught with joy. He sniffed the destroyed holt, the bitten fern, grass, and moss in the broken cavern that had been the badgers' kitchen. He seemed not to like the scent, and ran away. I called him to heel, and seizing him by the collar, put his nose to one of the sacks. He

gave a gurgle of fear and struggled in terror. He would not go near the sacks again.

Master and huntsmen had another drink of whiskey, and received congratulations from the short man, his daughter and wife, and the innkeeper. As the master was praising the Mad Mullah's goodness to its owner, the dog pulled the leash out of the innkeeper's hand and dashed at the nearest bag, biting the bulge of canvas. It was secured, however, and given a kick in the ribs by its embarrassed owner. The crooked-nosed man lifted the jar again, and filled up the master's mug with the brown spirit. More cigarettes were lit, and questions asked about the fate of the badgers. The farmer was consulted, and said that he would let the master decide. 'I'll be satisfied, gennulmen, with whatever you gennulmen may care to decide.' So it was decided to kill the boar and to release the sow.

One of the bags was opened. The greyish animal lay quiet and subdued at the bottom. It made no effort to escape or to bite as the canvas was rolled back. Someone held its tail. Underneath the gland containing the musk-like scent – which the master again informed us was for sexual attraction – was again pointed out. It was the boar. Both sacks were taken to the grassy field below, while the terriers howled and the wind flapped overcoats and made a squeaky sighing in the blackthorns.

In the middle of the field they stopped.

'All terriers to be leashed, please,' ordered the master. 'Everyone to stand behind me.'

The mouth of the bag was untied, and the sow badger tumbled out. Immediately she set off for home: a grey animal, low and wide and heavy, her short pointed tail yellow like an old tallow candle. She bounded along, heavy with the unborn, seeming to move slowly, and yet covering the ground quickly. The master shouted *Leu-leu-leu! Aa-ee-i-oo-yah!* and blew the horn. The terriers set up a frenzied yelping chorus. Somebody cheered. Suddenly the Mad Mullah got loose, and raced after the sow. The master swore. The dog overtook the sow a few yards before the brake of blackthorn. I saw the white flash of her head many times. The dog would not go near her. Every time he rushed she turned and snapped, and the white arrow showed against the grass. Through the brake she bundled, getting safely into her ruined home. The innkeeper went for his dog, gave it several kicks in the ribs and returned with flushed face, muttering.

The second bag was held up. A sharp spade blow on the nose stunned the still boar badger inside. The inert body was rolled out, with half closed eyes and stumpy paws held up limply. From his pocket the master took a knife with a dagger blade. Putting his foot on the boar's chest, he leaned down, and pressed it into its throat, turning the blade with a scooping movement in order to enlarge the hole. When withdrawn, purple-red

blood gushed. The grey hairy body was held up by its scut. The thick flow drained out and fouled some early daisies. The animal gave two feeble kicks as the life broke out of its body.

I heard the first lark of the new year singing at that moment, the shrill silver-shavings of music coming in a lull of the wind. High against the rain clouds it fluttered, a dark speck. Just before me on the ground the master was kneeling, hacking at the neck of the dead badger. The sharp blade severed skin and red-brown muscles. It was a thick neck, and the head had to be twisted off. Rising with it in his hand, the master presented it to the smiling schoolgirl, whose smile, I fancied, was only on her lips, not in her eyes. Her dislike of the scene was probably not my fancy, for I learned afterwards that she was the daughter of the long-nosed little man who had been standing by quietly during the dig. His resemblance to a badger had been remarked by others before me. I learned from the broken-nosed man that his friends called him Brock. He told me he had dug out a thousand badgers in Kent and Sussex, and had released all but fifteen, which the farmers had insisted were hen-takers. The fifteen he had killed reluctantly, he said.

Next a pad was cut and twisted off. Then the Mad Mullah got loose again, flinging itself with a snarl on the carcase, fixing its teeth into the neck and shaking it. The master, who had been stradd-

ling the trunk, went white in the face with rage, and raising himself on his knees, he flourished the bloody knife and screamed:

'If you don't hold your ——— dog in, I'll cut the ———'s head off.'

'He's too strong for me,' yelled the angry innkeeper. 'He broke his lead.'

'I'll cut his ——— neck off next time!'

The innkeeper's face grew lilac with anger, and shaking his fist he bawled that 'if his ——— dog's head was cut off, then he would cut off the master's ——— head,' and other things as well. Our eyes brightened; this was much better than the business with shovels, picks, tongs, and knives. But unfortunately the master, after going a lilac colour in the face, which blended well with that part of his grey hat not stained with hair-oil, did not reply. His mouth was frothed at the corners; his lips moved, but no words came; he pushed his grey bowler further back on his head, while a big vein slowly sunk on his temple. Then he went on with the severing of the pads.

These four trophies being removed, the trunk was opened and the liver ripped out. A small boy came forward to be blooded, and on forehead and cheeks the gore of the slain was dabbled. The same thing was due to myself, since it was the first time I had remained to see the death of a badger. I was given a pad – covered with short black hairs, with five black digging claws, three of them broken. I

murmured thanks, and tried not to look unpleasant, as I wondered if the boar had broken them as he dug for the safety of his mate and himself. His labour availed nothing, for pick and spade and harrying terriers working along a tunnel are more speedy than ten claws scratching on hard stone and earth. Now he was a lump without head and paws, and his blood was on my brow and cheek. I felt I had been false to myself, and yet another thought told me such feelings flourished only in nervous weakness. Why worry? And yet, only ten claws.

The lump was thrown into the air with yells of *Tear 'im, tear 'im.* The terriers having been released – except that of the innkeeper which was being dragged, howling and looking back, up the hill – the master blew his horn. Snarling, worrying, snapping, shaking, the mob of dogs pulled the grey lump down the sloping field, leaving behind on the mossy grass a long red smudge like the track of a giant ruddled slug. The little copper horn was examined, and the score of graven names of former meets read by the curious. I released the spaniel, who leapt to the worry, barking his excitement, but giving no more than the gentlest touch with his nose. He kills nothing; when we go hunting for the food which keeps us alive, he holds the rabbit, but will not puncture the skin. He will retrieve an egg; not the smallest dent is made. With the dried blood stiff on my temples I climbed the hill, cursing the satanic ways of men, yet knowing myself vile,

for they had not known what they were doing, but I had betrayed an innocent; and all the tears – weak, whiskey tears – would not wash from my brow the blood of a little brother.

Epigraph. The above was written in 1923. A few weeks later, I remember, I re-entered the waiting room of a dentist, and recognised in there the farmer on whose land the dig, described above, was held. He was in a state of mental agitation, leaning forward, clasping and unclasping his hands, and then sitting back on his chair, and sighing deeply. The whirring sound of a vacuum cleaner in another room had a most disturbing effect on him: he groaned, wiped his brow with his hand, ran his finger round his stiff white rubber collar, and said hoarsely, 'That be the gas they'm pumping up, that be for me, maister. O-oh. They'm pumping up the gas for me.' He wrung his hands, and ran his hand over his forehead again and again. 'Have you ever had a mumblin' tooth pulled?' he asked. I told him yes, and that the pain was slight if one controlled it. 'Did it take long, surenuff?' he asked. 'About twenty minutes,' I said, for it had been a long-fanged wisdom tooth. However, beyond the ache of the dentist's wrists, it had been a negligible operation. To sooth him I talked about the badger dig, confiding in him my dislike of the sport; and he agreed with me, but for different reasons, saying that 'they badger-diggers weren't much cop,' and

ought to have done the job properly, and killed both badgers. Afterwards he had gone back with his gun. 'That old sow, I shut'n proper.' I asked why, and he said, 'Well, no particular reason, if you follow my meanin' – but they bant no gude to no one.'

Like many other farmers I knew, this man was timid, afraid of pain for himself, and brutal to weaker things. His life and visions, and the fixed ideas of his Chapel upbringing had prevented him from outgrowing the Old Adam, and so from seeing the world as a different place, and life as a different thing.

NIGHT IN THE ESTUARY

THOSE restless and wild-piping birds, the waders, are sent wandering by frost to the estuary sandbanks, and in the windless night a thousand cries come through the darkness. The curlews' notes are more distinct, sounding like bubbles rising in a vast and tenuous pool, and breaking with trills of purest sound. As the tide carries its froth up the channels the cries increase; there are gulls and plover with them, redshank, dunlin, little stint, and shelduck, and the night is a maze of sweet sounds. The curlew is a shy, nervous bird, and in winter he cannot bear to be separated from his fellows. Sometimes by day a flock goes inland, flying high over the ploughlands, with their tossing wake of gulls and rooks and starlings. They stalk in the marshy fields afar off, rising at the sight of a man walking two fields away like many eyelashes, dull brown.

One frosty night as I listened to the lap and gurgle of the sea racing by the gravel ridges, a faint clamour, like staghounds laid on to the line of a deer, sounded far up in the sky. The clamour changed to a trumpeting, they were coming down; the water shook in a net of stars, the night was filled

with the rush of wings. A baying from stretched necks; a sudden uprising of frail cries from bank to bank, going far down into the distance; the harsh *Krark!* of an uneasy heron. The wild geese had flown down from the north.

For an hour, as I stamped on the foreshore to keep warm, I heard other birds joining them: mallards, heard half a mile away by the quick whistle of wings from which pinion-feathers were missing: green plover, soughing and calling forlornly, *see-o-weet, see-o-weet;* teal, with their small swift wings hurtling by; golden plover and dotterels speeding like flights of arrows.

Listening to the slur and trickle and bubble-link of their cries in the starlight, I wished I had the power to reproduce in music the variant night cries. I am a musician lamely writing in prose. Interwoven and continued, the cries of the wild birds glorified the night. Debussy could have caught and rendered their music; Stravinsky could do it – no one, knowing the natural life, and hearing his original version of *Nightingale*, could doubt his power and his feeling.

Ah, but Delius is the genius of wild aspiration and longing. Listen to *Brigg Fair* (preferably on a gramophone in the darkness) and you will *see* the spirit that Jefferies saw, for Delius and Jefferies are very near to each other. The composer would change into music the flare and flicker of Sirius; the dry hiss of wind in the rimed shore grasses; the tiny

glitter, as of black spiders' eyes, of the Pleiades; the blue lights of unseen ships lying off Bideford bar; the luminous smear of starlit mist over the Pebble Ridge; the myriad cries of the birds; the hollow roar of the breakers on the bar. Not only the translation of actual sight and sound into music, but the feeling of man who in moments of freedom becomes one in spirit with the birds, sharing the hope which, arising in their hearts, is loosed in wildest song when spring comes on the south wind, and the earth grows green in the sunshine.

SCANDAL AND GOSSIP

The tales which pass on the tongues of village people rarely gain or lose in the telling. The plain narrative is told as it was heard. After twenty minds have taken it in and given it out again it remains almost the same. There may be several reasons, or a combination of reasons, for this. Lack of imagination, this faculty not having been used for inward self-searching; fear of being found out; or because most of them are naturally factful where their money is not concerned. Much of the gossip is 'news,' which usually moves in a circular path, returning to the subject of it.

That the tales pass unvarying does not always mean that they are true. Some of the stories may have been started by someone incapable, through the shallowness of personal experience or intuition, of understanding the motives of others. Thus all stories of others are steeped with the quality of the originator; but how infrequently is this recognised! Too often the facts of the story are not strung with the spirit of their origin; the motives of others are not taken into account, causing distress to the sensitive. To an intelligent and impartial listener,

a story going around reveals only the quality of mind of the first speaker, just as what a man writes about his neighbours reveals his own quality and nature.

The ordinary villager does not like to express an original opinion unless he or she is certain others would agree. A man might begin with the words, 'They say,' and a woman with 'You know what they be saying up in the village? 'Tis awful what they do tell about. They be masterpieces for scandal. There's no saying what they'll be saying next. They say that –,' and then follows the story.

It does not need much intelligence to see the beam in a neighbour's eyes, especially if a beam of similar size and nature inhabits your own. Indeed, having a beam yourself, you are made the more aware, and thereby the more irritated, by the presence of other people's beams. The beam of gossip is a most subtle one to pluck out and hold with the tweezers of truth. Are not all things relative; as many worlds as there are pairs of eyes serving the interiors of skulls? Sometimes, however, the intangible issue of Truth may be escaped by humour. Such a case occurred in the village recently.

One Sunday morning a parson preached a sermon on this very subject of gossip. The subtlety of cause and effect, the influences of remote aversions and complexes, which may have had their share in the original spite, were not touched upon, but only what he termed the 'malicious effect of

thoughtless scandal.' He was suffering from some himself, and felt it keenly. Being full of trenchant generalization, it was considered a good sermon, and nearly all those who heard it were confirmed in their righteous dislike of their neighbour's shortcomings. It was talked about all the week, and the next Sunday the congregation awaited with interest another such sermon. It happened to be the Sunday when the local company of the County Territorial regiment held their annual Church Parade. The parson had something direct to say about another unpleasant aspect of village life. It appeared that a lady visitor to the village during the past week had told him that never in all her experience of English village life had she seen so much drunkenness as existed in the village of Ham. The parson said that if 'things did not improve, some people might find themselves within the arm of the law.'

It made a sensation; the good people knew whom he meant, etc. Albert Hancock, landlord of the Higher House, was a regular churchman in his neat blue serge suit, and after morning service he called upon Mr. Taylor of the Lower House. Mr. Taylor did not go to church; Sunday for him being the day when he could lie up a bit extra. He had just got out of bed. Together the two publicans, with the village constable, and some of the regular customers of the two inns, led by John Brown of Crowcombe Farm, called on the parson. John

Brown said that he represented the considered opinion of those present with him, if his reverence would excuse him saying so. He wished to say, with all respect, that the sermon preached by his reverence the previous Sunday, dealing with malicious gossip and the evil effects of a thoughtless word, had made such an impression on them that he felt he would like to suggest that the observations of a visitor, after staying but three days in the village, might possibly fall within the meaning of the word gossip. He hoped his reverence would excuse him for telling what his reverence probably knew already, that his remarks in church would be in the local paper next Thursday, that many of the Territorials in church, strangers from Combe, Town, and Cross Tree, etc., would carry away a bad impression of the parish, and the constable would be asked by his sergeant why the alleged drunkenness had not been reported. Men had a glass or two sometimes at night, and they sang a song sometimes, but the charge of general drunkenness seemed to him, a rough and ready man, without education, to come precisely within the meaning of the term scandal.

The parson, a man of courage, who was then new to the parish, apologised during the evening service for what, he said, he then knew to be an unfounded charge; but he had made it in all good faith, and for the good of the village, as he hated trouble, and looked upon them all as good children of God. He did not say (and he may not have known) how the

nervous tissue of the complaining spinster lady visitor had been wrought upon by her interpretations of what she thought was actuality when, walking down Stony Hill on the Saturday night preceding, silently on rubber soles, she had passed between two lines of men standing with faces to the ditched walls on either side of the lane, where no nettles or other weeds could grow. One of the men – it was Willy Gammon – was singing; others were talking loudly, and sometimes there was a word that had a meaning in a town different from its jovial everyday use in the country. It was a few minutes after ten o'clock, and the men had just come out of the Higher House.

What were natural acts were thought to be 'vile and beastly' in the good woman's mind, and out of her reaction and indignation – without thought – she had made her charges against the village. By her words had she revealed her limitations. In the Higher House they understood, and were not angry with her; but it is doubtful if she will ever understand the Higher House.

THE POOR FOWL

Stormy seas have discovered new rocks in the sands, and the bright orange and grey lichens, which thrive where other vegetation perishes, have not yet had time to fasten on them. Rocks which for years I have known as fangs and stumps are now many feet high. They are brown with the iron in them. In a cranny of one of the monoliths thus exposed my spaniel found a bird crouching, and called me to it with excited whines. It tried to peck him with its long, sharp, dusky beak, while squawking, and flapping its short black wings. The dog patiently stood by it, as it cowered in a corner.

It was a common guillemot, and its plumage was smeared with a brown oily substance which prevented it from flying. This was oil-fuel, or the scum which is cast overboard when ships clean out their tanks. It lies on the water, where it floats until cast up on the shore perhaps years after it was dumped in the sea, and in summer the legs and arms of children playing on the sands are smirched as with tar. Limbs may be cleaned, but woe to the bird that is fouled far out to sea! Perhaps it rises with a fish into a belt of the stuff, which with one touch condemns it to a long agony of

flightlessness. It can swim and dive, but it must forever live on the surface of the sea.

How many weeks, I wondered, had the wing-wrecked bird been rising and falling in the unresting Atlantic? The south-west gales had driven it landwards, night and day, until the breakers caught it and bore it along, in a roar and swirl of winter surf, and flung it on the strand.

Once on land, it was doomed to die. It might pick up sandhoppers and shellfish, but these be scanty food for a guillemot. Ravens and carrion crows, seeing the injured seabird, would drop down as they flew over and batter it with their beaks. The herring gulls, which flock on the wet shore as the tide ebbs, would fight and scream over the bedraggled thing too weak to move. At night rats swarmed from the land, as I could see by the prints of thousands of feet around the rocks.

What could be done for it? Petrol might clean the clogging filth from barb and filament of the feathers, but the village was three miles away, and it was nearly dead. While I meditated an old man shuffled over the sands, with a sack of driftwood and sea coal on his bent back. Seeing the bird, he asked me to give it to him.

''Er would taste proper, baked wi' tetties, mid-ear,' he said to me. So the guillemot was knocked on the head with my holly staff, and Old Woolacott went home to cook it with potatoes. The best ending for the poor fowl, I thought.

A MASON'S WEEK

WILLY Gammon was fifty years old, and for more than thirty-five years he had worked as a mason. In the years following the Great War he earned 1s. 5½d. an hour, working forty-seven hours a week. Some people, including John Gammon, his father, stronger and more active man than Willy, thought of him as a poor stupid fellow; for he passed most of his evening hours in the village inns, and spent half of his money there. In this manner:

On Saturday night – he was paid at noon on that day – washed and shaved and clean-shirted, and wearing a pair of brown shoes given him by one of his sons, Willy Gammon drank bottled stout, sixpenny ale, and a drop or two of whiskey to finish up on. On Sunday before dinner (which he would eat after closing time at two o'clock) it would be sixpenny; on Sunday evening, sixpenny again and perhaps one drop of whiskey. Sunday nights were always quiet in the inns; best suits, boots, and hats; no cards, no table-skittles, no wall-quoits. Sometimes one or another of Willy's younger sons came in for a mineral – lemonade or ginger beer – boldly smoking their first grown-up fags, caps pushed well back over masses of curly black hair, peaks pointing

upwards. The parson thought they had Spanish blood in their veins – a pleasant fancy about all the dark-haired families in the western seaboard villages, arising out of third-rate works of fiction inspired by visions of the glorious Armada. All the guide books, being hack-works paid for at cheap rates, repeated the legend.

Monday it would be sixpenny, perhaps six or seven pints. Willy was slowing up a bit, for the mid-week drought. Tuesday would begin with sixpenny, and change to fivepenny after nine o'clock; the glass rattled at ten o'clock for a pint of sixpenny 'to finish up on.' Wednesday would be all fivepenny, a quiet evening. Thursday might be cider, if it was not too early in the year – cider at fourpence a pint, 'zinging stuff,' making a man swing round in his walk after very little. Four pints would do it, but it depended on the cider. Some barrels were better than others, especially if they had had an iron chain or a few pounds of beef steak or pigs' ears dropped through the bung-hole. The acid would eat iron and flesh away, and give a body to the apple-wine.

Friday he might go to the inn to play whist for a pint; if he lost, he would pay the landlord the next evening. Or he might not go up at all, but spend the evening in his garden, if spring or summer weather; or sit at home on the settle (the old brown wood of which was papered with squares out of a wallpaper sample book) and nurse the baby. There

was always a baby in the Willy Gammon cottage during the first twenty years of his married life, lying with white face in the cradle of half a tub near the settle. His wife had had a hard life, bringing up so many children, in a cottage with one dark living room, and one bedroom divided into two by a thin wall of lath-and-plaster. She had managed somehow, bringing up the children on what money had not gone into the Higher and Lower Houses; leaving the eldest child not in school to mind the younger children, while she hurried away along the lane to some work or other in the village. Everyone in the Willy Gammon household may have appeared to a visitor to be 'crossing' someone else, children yelling and tumbling on the floor, mother yelling at the children to keep quiet, the cat flying from grubby arms that would nurse it upsydown, the hen stalking by the threshold, her chickens running about her, the eldest girl subject to fits when the moon was full – often striking her mother just before they came on. Yet they thrived somehow. Clothes went from one child to another downwards. They were a sturdy lot of children, with the exception of 'that poor eldest maid,' as Willy described her to me in his placid voice, in his beautiful voice, so quiet when he was away from the inn, ''Tis an expense, but us don't grudge that: her's been to a Home, but wasn't any better afterwards. Her wull bide along wi' us now until the Lord takes her, but 'tis an expense.'

The children were never without boots or warm clothing. His wife was strong, and she did not fret. The sun got hold of her babies as soon as they could crawl over the threshold, and made their limbs and faces brown and sturdy. Her husband was kind and gentle, and very fond of the childer; of course he shouted at them sometimes, and trimmed them up with hand or stick – always in anger, as was natural, and never very hard. The more bad beer was poured into Willy Gammon, the more good nature seemed to come from him, and keep the family going with humour. So had he been born, inheriting his mother's nature, which nothing seemed to corrode. They laughed with him when their quick tears of rage had dried.

Some of the children are now parents themselves. One of the elder sons has served his seven years with the Colours, and returned to the village with a wife from Malta, and has two children. He too is a mason, riding to and from work on a bicycle. He takes the living interest that all the men take in their gardens, telling his toddling son not to pull up his cabbage plants, as once his father had to tell him. He does not go to the inn. At present his wife and family occupy all his leisure hours. Later on he may go and sit there for an hour or two in the evening, until it becomes a habit, the interrupting of which will make him unsettled. If he goes he will go for talk, for company. The beer is a secondary thing, as I discovered one summer

when I bought a nine-gallon cask of the best Bass, dark brown barley-wine, and I asked both Tom and Willy Gammon to come down and drink it with me. They came down, had a pint each, stared at the floor, and after awhile took their departure. I followed them up to the Higher House, having no wife and family in those days. They never came again, and the beer went bad.

A WINTER FRESH

The flood waters of the river-estuary – called the fresh – were ebbing in red-brown swirls and eddies, pushed by the rain drained into the tide by a hundred streams and runners in the valley. Trees, roots, and leaves were riding past, some borne from near the river's source on Dartmoor. Sometimes the body of a chicken or a sheep was swilled and bumped through one of the fourteen tide-races under the Long Bridge. Gulls screamed over the water.

From the bay salmon and bass had come to feed on the shrimps and beetles dislodged by the flood from stone and gravel haunts to the wide and unknown chaos of sea and mud. A pair of cormorants were fishing in mid-river, bobbing under after thirty leg-strokes and swimming for flukes (flatfish) near the bottom. Their underwater thrusts lasted from seven to seventy seconds. Every time one rose to the surface it cocked an eye at the urchins gathering driftwood and lesser branches at the western line of the ebbing water.

Only the boys, of all the busy creatures, were ill-clad. They wore neither boots nor stockings. Each

boy carried a rope with a loop on its dragging end. They ran swiftly and surely, with unheard patterings of feet. Every snag was a problem in haulage. They stood amid seaweed on the rocky shelf a yard above the mud, which was printed with old drowned footmarks.

A cold north-east wind blew from the high ground of the moor beyond the houses of East-the-water. Under the smears of mud the legs of the children were red and blue as the shell of a fiddler crab. They were keen with happiness. Like the gulls, they cried shrilly among themselves.

The seabirds, driven by the stormy weather from the bay to the shelter of the river under the oak-grown hill-slopes, screamed and scrupeted perpetually, as they rose and fell and glided after a lesser black-backed gull with a dead rat in its beak. Across the river the chase went on, as far as the round humps of the petrol storage tanks and the rotting green hulk of an abandoned gravel-barge under a half-derelict quay, and back again until the rat-bearer, which had been trying to gulp down its meal as it dipped and swerved and wing-tumbled before its pursuers, dropped the rat, which was caught in falling by a herring gull. The gull swallowed it in mid-air while seeming to stand on its tail. At once the birds drifted apart.

Heavy clouds like snow-peaks lay ponderously along the horizon; their shapes and outlines were similar to the mud patterns above the verge of the

dropping water, where road-water drained. While watching a stick in an eddy spinning seawards faster than a man could walk, the dun hues of the fresh were suddenly illuminated by a green-blue line drawn down the river. Above the little whirlpool it poised in a flutter of azure and red, it plunged, and emerged with a small thumb-bass in its beak. The kingfisher lit on one of the branches salved by the urchins, gripped with its pink claws, beat its prey violently, swallowed it, and flew away downstream under the third of the fourteen irregular arches. I heard its shrill whistle, keen and decisive as the line of its flight, as I walked away to my lunch. The river gleamed with sky-colour, like the flank of a clean-run salmon, when I looked back from the road beside the marsh called Little America. Now the sun was shining, and the snow-peaks of clouds were gold-laden. Gulls swimming in the distance, above the bridge which was a grey caterpillar over the river, were like beads of bright water riding there.

WASHING DAY

From the top of the church tower one has a starling's view of Ham: the starlings which in autumn begin to foregather along the battlements, the flag-staff and its wires, the gilt weather-vane. The village lies below, formless and casual in winter, with dark brown thatch, uneven slopes of worn slate roofs, new red tiles, and pink asbestos roofs. Gradually the eye from this clear loftiness traces the shape of the village, which lies under the green hills, at the head of a valley. The valley opens into the sea a mile and a half to the south-west. Cottages and bungalows, cob and stone and brick and corrugated iron – ancient and modern – stand beside the roads, which reveal the village as in shape like an old-fashioned swan-neck spur. The slightly hollow space between the higher and lower lanes – the horns of the spur – is divided by a stream, down to which slope the ragged and flat winter gardens, with their old pails and boxes; tubs; oval baths, broken and rusty, hiding early rhubarb; dung heaps; fruit trees lichened and dishevelled with wild wood, gnarled and blighted, never sprayed, never pruned. The swan-neck of the spur is the lane

leading past the church and turning up the lane called Stony Hill.

To the church tower various noises arise from the enclosed hollow of the village. The noises vary with the seasons, and with the light of the sun. There are the rooks, in the trees whose tops are below the tower; the belving of cows in the shippens of Hole Farm, and the barking of the young cattle dog shut in a barn; the clack and rattle of straw ropes being twisted by the village carpenter helped by small boys; the evening shouts of my good friend Revvy, the labourer, to Ernie and Madge in the water, or sneaking green gooseberries, or otherwise in mischief; the extraordinary bawling roar of a heavy red-faced youth singing, 'Yes, we have no bananas,' or 'Show me the way tu go oom,' as he cleans his motor-cycle in the lean-to shed just beyond the churchyard gate; the faint ringing in the pail of jets of milk; the occasional loud report of a shot-gun; and sometimes, in fine weather, the singing of the hard-working daughter of Hole Farm, as, happy in her thoughts, she gets the washing ready in the back-house. There is another woman in the farmhouse, her mother; but the mother never goes out. For many years she has never left the farmhouse, except in the early morning to sweep the slate slab of the threshold, and after rain to brush reddish water from the puddle in the roadway below the barred dairy window. The puddle is always filled in wet weather,

for each brushing helps to deepen it; but every morning after rain I see the small pale face and the expressionless dark eyes of the little body with her besom. If I happen to be passing, she gives me the least glance, only her lips reply to my good morning; the door closes and she is gone. The village people call her husband 'Stroyle' George – a gaunt and solitary man, with side-whiskers and a nose like an eagle's beak, who is usually either at solitary work in his fields, or talking to others in the lanes. He is a ploughman of genius: he ploughs straight because, as he says, 'He couldn't drave the ploo otherwise.' Nevertheless his fields are full of stroyle, and usually backward in sowing; the farm is too large for him, and he has no son to help him.

Stroyle is couch-grass, whose thick, sturdy, whitish roots, pointing and creeping everywhere underground, take the food of the wheat in the fields. Farmer George has one son, who sits in a window-seat all day, his frail legs hanging to the floor. The face of the farm-wife is a mother-face, the face of a woman who, like a flower, forgets herself and lives in her children. Daughter Alice tends the poor crippled brother; it is Alice whose joyous singing I hear on the top of the church tower, now that the south-west has cleared of its rain drifting grey up the valley, and the sun has freed in leaf and wing and man the very essence of life.

On the big kitchen chimney of Hole Farm hangs dead ivy, blackened at the top with smoke, withered

and drab in its sapless poverty. Behind it stands a smaller chimney, topped with extra bricks to draw up the draught – after four centuries of farm-wives in weekly discomfort. This morning, as on every Monday morning during the year, the smaller chimney begins to flow with dense white smoke. The south wind carries the smoke among the nine elms in row beneath the tower, guarding the western end of the churchyard. The faint eddies and whirls mingle with smoke from other furnace chimneys, drifting in a haze over the tombstones and among the bare branches. Most of the 'furnace' chimneys are drain-pipes, often cracked and loose in old mortar, leaning out of ramshackle 'backhouses': nine o'clock on Monday mornings is their hour.

Standing on the lead roof of the church tower, I try to recognise and count the smells borne past me in the gentle south wind. It is not easy, for the sense of smell soon dulls; but I recognise apple sticks, candle grease, paraffin fumes, rags, parings of horse-foot – this from the blacksmith's forge at the end of one horn of the village – the acrid fumes of paper. I must admit that my nose is helped by my memory, for I know already what the cottage wives burn in their furnaces.

The heaps of old rummage collected by the cottage wives beside their furnaces are made up of bits of the village, which is decaying and being renewed in eternity. Boots boughten a dozen years ago, worn to the uppers, the lace-holes broken; small

wood, too rotten to repair the gate with or the chicken coop; posts which the boring worm or the mildew have done with; bean stalks too brittle to kindle the bodley kitchen range in the morning; cleaning cloths that were dropping to pieces; rags discoloured with age; stockings which, having been darned with wool many times their original weight, and then used for polishing a year or two, were regretfully scrapped; old magazines, dog-eared by many fingers and thumbs, which came originally, years before, by way of one of the servants from the Rectory or the big house of Pidickswell; rotten bean sticks, or twigs blown down from the apple trees; old bird-nests; old envelopes; lengths of decayed rope and string; tufts of cow-hair found in flakes of mortar fallen from the outer walls; dried rabbits' feet; chicken feathers frayed by moths; rubber bands off potted meat jars; fragments of long-worn-out corsets ripped into bits. All in dry and dusty heap beside the furnace.

But, outside the door of the wash-house, the garden path is strewn with coal cinders, which also are cast on the beds, with broken plates and glass; several hundred-weight of good cinders cast away every year, for few cottage wives will waste money on buying sieves.

In spring Alice of Hole Farm, busy with washing stick, sometimes sees a ruddock or a crackey – robin or wren – flit through the open door, seize a piece of hair or bark fibre, and flit away to its building.

At night the mouse runs out of the rummage heap, searching, with sharp nose and delicate small paw, for paper and rag for its nest; and the beetle creeps over the axe-broken lime-ash floor, scuttling home at the first light, long before the footfalls ring in the stone, and the basket of the week's washing is put down.

A match to the dry rubbish shovelled on to the flaked fire-bars under the curved iron bowl of the blackened furnace, the white fumes straying out until the flame suddenly rumbles and leaps up with the draught. The Monday morning smoke pours out of the chimney top, taking the cries of the lost little mice into the sky which hears all, and yet hears nothing.

THE LINNETS

When the tide ebbs in the pill (creek) the saltings are left with lines of jetsam – seaweed, sticks, crab shells, and corks. The saltings are of drowned turf, fissured with mud guts, and spurred with the foot-marks of wading birds. In winter flocks of finches fly to the saltings, searching for seeds of sea-thrift, hawkbits, and wild Michaelmas daisies blown there in summer and autumn.

Golden plover and curlew feed in the mud of the pill. Standing on the grassy sea-wall, I could hear the fresh water of the stream running on its stony bed, a hundred yards away over the saltings. The colourless sounds of water and stones rose in the cold still air of winter, and when my spaniel splattered into the mud the wading birds flew up, and wild music, like twigs of gold, dropped along the sunken way. Bubbles and trills of sweet sound, which set the linnets on the telegraph wire to twitter, so that I was ravished by that stroke of glowing colour, auburn as their breasts, that one linnet-note which makes all else to fade, and the world forgotten.

Is it too fanciful to think that the bird itself is

in a like state of spiritual joy? The note falls out of its little throat as it sits with its brethren in the sunlit air of this blessed place. What mean thoughts can a linnet have? It feeds on the seeds of the earth, hovering and fluttering about the dry stalks and ruinous heads of ragwort and thistle, flying from hollow to hollow of waste lands. No thoughts of love yet in their feathered skulls, piping one to another, flock mingling with flock; such excitement of song-talk and gossamer-whisper as they feed, and being fed, do rest side-by-side, ever watching the sky for hawk or sedge-owl. And when the soft wind blows again from the south, and the sun throws down the celandines among the grass, these winged ones, these specks of that which breathed a Shelley into dust, will sing in shining chatter on the thorns, and two by two will steal away, and find a safe place in the gorse.

Once the friend of my boyhood came to see me in Devon, and we walked and ran on a hill overlooking the flat green sections of the Great Field, seeing the gleaming water-streaks around and beyond the marshes. In a heedless moment I put a match to the sere spikes under a hump of gorse, and a straight flame of smoke and heated air crackled and pierced the thick green bush. A thralling and eager sight, as in wild boyhood! Then in the shrill singing of sap and flower a voice cried in terror, and a linnet fluttered out of the burning bush, circling around the cruel glassy pinnacle of

smoke and flame, and crying for her naked young in the frail nest of horsehair and fibre.

We beat out the fire, but the nest was scorched, the nestlings were dead. A needless cruelty; and like nearly all cruelty, caused by not knowing what we do to others. Out of a dark and deadly ignorance arose the thought, that only when the earth-born darkness was finally shed in a man would he be re-born, and raised to the level of a wild singing bird, a joyful spirit that can do no meanness.

1922

THE VILLAGE INNS

(1) THE LOWER HOUSE

THE village of Ham has two inns. Labourers call them the Higher House and the Lower House. Both are built on grey rock. The Lower House, which stands at the top of Church Street, where it meets the village street, has a stable yard, which the Higher House has not. Under the sign a tall yellow stalk, taller than a man, has grown since the War, with a white globous head bearing the word *Petrol*. Rarely is a pony seen tethered to the wall-ring of the Lower House; but the sight is frequent outside the Higher House.

The Lower House is not 'tied' like the Higher House, that is, the property of a brewery company; it is a free house, which means that the landlord may buy any beer that he likes. Mr. Hancock, born and bred in the parish, kept the Higher House; Mr. Taylor kept the Lower House, his own property, purchased out of savings made in the licensed victualling trade during the War in the large coastal town eight miles away. Mr. Hancock was quiet by nature, and thrifty; Mr. Taylor, who

did no other work during the day, was more ready for good company at any hour of the day and night. He spent his money easily.

Both drank the beer out of their own barrels every night, and on Saturday nights the glasses were filled more often. Then Mr. Hancock was wont to become quietly philosophical, and poetic in his soft thickening whispered confidences about his love for fields and trees and sunlight in the early morning, and how he read *Tit-Bits* to increase his knowledge, and how every moment of living was a grand moment for him; while Mr. Taylor usually drank whiskey after nine o'clock, and was singing a song at ten o'clock, in a high false voice, the only words of which I have heard being 'My own true love.' Singing and joviality out of which anger and rage were liable to burst.

Mr. Hancock of the Higher House seldom drank whiskey; he drank his owner-brewer's beer, which did not always agree with him, especially after the heavy meal he took at six o'clock when he returned from work in the fields. He was never quarrelsome. He never 'took a drop too much,' in the police court sense, but often I saw him tapping his paunch with his fist, to rid himself of wind. He was a short little man, with a round and honest face; answering to the name of Albert. Some time or other during the evening he would call every one of his customers 'sir.' Most of them he had known since days together at the village school, and outside the inn

they were Billy, Tom, or Farmer Jack. Everyone in the village liked Albert.

Mr. Taylor bought the freehold and goodwill of the Lower House at public auction for four hundred and fifty pounds, two years after the War. The owner put up for sale by auction the place and its effects; the old tenant, coming home demobilised from the Army, had to clear out. Cottages were not to be had in the village, but he found lodgings in another village, and set up as a cobbler. He had a wife, two grown daughters, and a son; a rather shiftless family, saving nothing, indeed, having little to save. They were rarely harmonious; and their sufferings caused harsh speaking. One morning he cut his throat with a razor. Afterwards his widow used to walk the three miles to the inn, and was to be seen at night, sitting in the corner, one with the shadow cast by the smitching yellow flame of the oil lamp. She used to say that he was a good man; and then she would weep, and moan that she had treated him bad, and take a sip of the glass of beer given her in sympathy by the new landlord.

In spring nettles and celandines grow on his grave in unconsecrated ground under the elms of the churchyard, where withered flowers and broken pots were heaped by the sexton. I remember the Lower House years ago when he kept it; it was always gloomy, and the Higher House was warm and noisy. A small dislustred goldfish in a bowl on

the mahogany-varnished counter passed the years in rounds of weak-finned and aimless nosing of dirty glass. One day, soon after the suicide of the sad landlord, I saw it lying in the road, flat, dusty, insignificant, but released.

The new owner of the Lower House had the roof repaired, the corner stone and lower borders tarred and the walls lime-washed. The martins' nests under the eaves were poked down, and their young died on the sett-stones under. The gutters were cleared, the window frames and the doors and the sign were repainted. The word *Garage* was painted on the yard doors. The new landlord brought with him a small bagatelle table, and a row of coloured liqueur bottles. Occasionally in summer a couple of London visitors, hatless and in flannels, would call for one of the minute drinks from the bottles. The beer sales were scanty, too. The Higher House had nearly all the custom, except for the two Gammon brothers, the masons, who walked – but never together – from Higher House to Lower House, and up to Higher House again, every night at the beginning of each week, for variety.

To get custom, and also to have a merry evening, the landlord of the Lower House gave a Rabbit Supper, to which all were invited by means of printed bills advertising the time and the day, the name of the Chairman, the free beer, and songs afterwards. It was held in the bar room, which was filled with chairs and tables. For some reason the

Chairman, a yeoman farmer, did not turn up; nor did one half of the number expected. The landlord was disappointed, and as the supper was liable to be zamzawed, i.e. dried up, if kept longer in the oven, it was decided to begin under another Chairman.

Would I take the chair? I would. It was a jolly party, beer unlimited; but no one got drunk. Someone said that the supper was too early – half-past six o'clock: that the men had not had their tea, or time to tidy up a bit. Yet at six o'clock about half a dozen men were standing in the usual meeting place by the ditched wall under the glebe field outside the inn. They had to be persuaded to come in. Free food and beer! 'Times was changed since my kid days; in they days the whole of Ham would have been yurr to opening time, gathering to the rattle o' the pig bucket.' This the serious comment of old Muggy.

The Church and Chapel people, who did not as a rule 'go to pub,' did not come, nor were they expected. Those in whom the social, or friendly, spirit was more widely open, were there already. Also the regular drinkers – Willy and Tom Gammon; Jack Lovering the blacksmith; 'Sailor' Zeale pensioned from the Navy, who worked in the quarries when his monthly pension was spent in Higher and Lower House; Jack Brimblecombe the trapper, another pensioner; John Tucker the mason, who served through the War as a sapper, and had

repaired the roof of the Lower House; 'Thunderbolt' Carter, the retired nine-acre farmer with club-feet; Clibbit Kifft the wife-beater, plate-breaker, pig-shooter, whose voice was a scrape; Arty Brooking the grocer and butcher, whose elder brother was too scared to be seen in any pub, since he dug the graves and cut the grass in the churchyard and 'you never know what they'll be telling 'bout 'ee, do 'ee?'; John Kift the ferreter, and his handsome, unmarried son; and eight others. More were expected to come along later. Well, they didn't come, and Mr. Taylor said, more than once, in his disappointment, that he wouldn't have give a supper had he known only so few would turn up, noomye! Paper table napkins were provided – 'What be these yurr: hankerchiefs?' enquired the elder of the Gammon brothers.

After the plates had been handed up, and the air was thickening with smoke, a young farmer was asked to sing, but refused; and after an interval, a short sturdy man, with ruddle-red face, neck, hands, and clothes – he was a stone-cracker – jumped up and said he would oblige the company. Cries of 'Order, please!' and some shout for quiet; and waiting for a moment when no voice was raised, the singer, whose eyes for nearly a minute had been fixed in the corner of the ceiling above the multi-shapen liqueur bottles, began his song.

He sang in a high falsetto voice, the top notes of which were stifled and alarmingly forced. Like the

other songs (with one exception) which I have heard the men sing on Saturday nights – after lowering several pints – this song was in a minor key, a song learned in youth and sung at intervals since. It might have been popular at the London music-halls at the end of the nineteenth century. It was a favourite song, and applauded with shouts, and boots stamped on the lime-ash floor. Immediately afterwards, not waiting for a break in the noise, the singer began again. As before, the song was without vitality. In talk, as I knew, the stonecracker spoke good and simple English; some of his phrases, the plain common phrases of the country, I wrote down in my notebook at the time, and later was astonished, and delighted, to find the same phrases in Shakespeare. (He had not taken them from the book Shakespeare; but the living Shakespeare had taken them from common speech). Sometimes in talk, when meeting a friend in the lanes, I would ask for a phrase to be repeated; and almost invariably the speaker would hesitate, deprecate his own language, and explain, 'That's how us says it; the rough way, you know; it ba'nt the educated way of saying it, no doubt.' Also with what is called dialect words – they hid them sometimes from strangers, believing them inferior; some of them probably in English use before the Norman conquest, others as old. *Fitchey* (stoat), *dreshel* (flail), *weest* (dreary), *dimmity* (twilight), etc. *He was as proper a man as ever trod*

ground. Wait until the ground's in temper; (i.e. the garden soil warm and loose for digging) *it's no use mucketting.* The exact and simple speech of their forefathers, until they understood I was finding value in it, was deprecated; the wording of the daily newspapers, arriving every mid-day in the village in canvas bags slung across the rear wheel of a red bicycle pushed by a small boy – the job changed hands about once a month, and so the pushing boy was always small – was considered the educated way.

The stonecracker was singing his song as he had sung it scores of times before. Its title had been announced, *After the Ball.* I drank a draught of beer, and considered the problem: – had he ever understood what the words meant? If so, why did he sing them as though they were the words of an incomprehensible language? Perhaps he thought they represented the true and sad history of a gentleman's life – that strange and wonderful being who did not feel or work as common men like himself. Too late – after the ball – the cause of jealousy was found to be baseless: the man who had handed her a glass of water was her brother. So the lilting and stifled falsetto of the singer declared, in a minor key. At least, that is the impression I had of the song. The first few bars told me that it was not a real village song; his voice, heard above the many subdued but insistent head-to-head arguments, was like the magnified but

varied noises of a mosquito in the smoky fug of oil-lamp light. I hid my grins, exchanged with an imagined companion of old time, in the handy beer-mug. At last he stopped in a rumble of applause, while the arguments about the foolishness, or the wisdom, of the Parish Council choosing Jonathan Furze's field for the new Cemetery, immediately redoubled in volume. 'I'll tell 'ee fur why——' 'Wait a bit now, what about the cost to the rate-payer?——' 'Yes, and if he's got all that land, can't 'a spare an acre?' 'Tis always the likes of he——' etc. He was going to sing again! The landlord, after a visit to the barrel room, whence he returned licking his moustache, called upon the chairman to give another chap a chance; and having risen to my feet, and shouted for silence – momentary – I thanked the singer, and called upon Willy Gammon, one of the masoning brothers. They laughed. Bill Gammon cried in his gentle voice, 'I bant ready yet, zur. I wull later on, surenuff, midear.' And after nine pints Willy did, sure enough, and had to be pulled off his feet; only force could stop his broken bellowing. He was the most popular man in the village – in the Higher and Lower Houses, that is; for outside there is no popular man. There are men owning property in cottages and fields; men going regularly to Church or Chapel; men who think and say that the dancing (foxtrots) of maids and young men in the new Institute is wicked; men who 'pay their way'

(they all do this); but no popular man, unless it be the village schoolmaster, and he is a little apart from the village. Willy Gammon owns no property; he is a grief to his father, the tall and handsome John Gammon.

Brownie, as he was usually called, was a Celtic type, with small head, hands, and feet; black of hair and moustache. He had more than a dozen children; he had the reputation for being a heavy drinker. Towards the end of the week, however, he drank hardly at all. He had no money towards the end of the week. When first I knew him, he lived in a cottage between the village and the hamlet of Cot; he used to go home part of the way with a yeoman farmer whom he called Jack, talking about the weather, the crops, the new cottages being built and 'the opening of the place up' with the prospect of regular work, the proposed New Cemetery, accompanying his thickish words with many bellows of laughter. At the entrance to the farm they would wait perhaps a minute or two minutes, while the talk slowed up: then in a pause one would say, 'Well, us mustn't bide yurr talkin' all night.' And the other would say, 'Well, us must get to bed sometime.' The other would reply, 'Well, 'oomwards!' and they would abruptly separate, Brownie round the corner of the high leaning orchard wall, Farmer Jack to his farmhouse glimmering beyond the walnut tree and the stone walls of the barn.

Farmer Jack – the absent Chairman on this night of the Rabbit Supper – during the years immediately after the War used to amuse the Lower House with his experiences in the ranks of the Royal Defence Corps, when he was stationed with his company at East Ham in London (Ham, *Anglo-Saxon* Hame, Home – will our remote village of Ham in Devon ever become a suburb of London like that other disverdured Ham?) on anti-aircraft work. '"Cor blime mate," I heard a soldier say, arriving on leave from France during an air raid. Yes, this man, he says, while all the others were scattering like a lot of bloody rabbits, this man says to me, cool as you like, as I was on sentry there, "Cor blime mate," he says to me, "Cor blime mate, strike me pink if a bleedun Zellepin ain't dropped a bleedun egg!" Cockney talk, that's it: they all talk like that in London.' After the laughter he would repeat the story again, for all stories were told twice over in the village.

While I have been remembering those days when first I came to the village – Farmer Jack has long since ceased to repeat the story of the Cockney soldier and the Zeppelin bomb which wrecked a dozen or more houses in its stupendous glaring crash – there were calls upon 'Mr. Chairman' by the landlord 'to invite some other gentleman to oblige with a song.' The singer of society life and the noisy Brownie, together with the fug of tobacco and the beer, had produced an environment in

which song-shyness had vanished; and now there were several voices raised for singing. One of them, belonging to a stuttering grey-haired man, with the eyes of a jackdaw, an ex-mayor of the neighbouring village of Cryde (which office was held by any who, leaving the streamside inn at night, chanced to fall into the water) seemed depressed that he had rivals. 'I don't c-c-care n-naught about it, I shan't sing if they d-d-don't stop their rattle, that's all,' he kept stuttering. 'N-n-no, I don't t-t-trouble!' Cries of 'Order, please, gennulmen! Horder!' And in the slightly diminished noise the singer fixed his eyes on the rim of his ale glass, and stuttered threateningly, 'Order, ulse I w-w-won't g-g-go on, n-n-noomye!' He began his song, which I managed to write down almost illegibly on the inside of the cigarette packet I had hastily ripped open:

The butcher went to market
To purchase for an ox;
The cunning little cobbler
As sly as any fox,
He put on his Sunday clothes
And a-courting he did go,
The butcher's wife along with him
Because he loved her so.

With his ring a ding a die
Me right to re de laddio
Foll de roll de raddio
There's whiskey in the jar.

After the first verse there was a cough in the silence, and immediately a chorus of cries, 'Well done, Tanglilegs!' 'Order!' 'Order gents, please!' 'Give a man a chance, customers all,' and other exclamations filling the room. The singer went on, after a hasty but deep gulp of his ale, in a more stentorian voice. Unfortunately I missed the next verse, while transcribing the first; but the song concluded:

He chucked the cobbler in the pen
The bull began to roar
The butcher began to laugh
He turned him o'er and o'er.

With his ring a ding a dye
Me right to re de laddio
Foll de roll de raddio
There's whiskey in the jar.

With hardly a pause for half a pint taken in three gulps, he began to sing again. The song was popular in England during the Boer War; and afterwards he declared, with wet explosions into my ear, that it was called *D-D-Dolly Grey*. The din increased, but he sang on; song after song of the music halls of twenty-five years ago. He had learned them as a youth somewhere – perhaps from a phonograph – and obviously considered himself an excellent entertainer. Well, he was, indirectly. I scribbled

many notes – afterwards indecipherable – as he sang, for the place was rich with life for me. I remember the almost mechanical singing of Tanglilegs being silenced by the apparition of Brownie on his feet, his glass eye fixed in a sideway shine, bawling *Roamin' in the Gloamin'*. 'Aw, t-t-tidden no sense,' stuttered 'Tanglilegs' Pearse, 'Ah, can't zing a zong p-p-p-properly, with all this b-b-bliddy row going on.' He was invited to have his glass filled up by Mrs. Taylor, and he held it out. 'Thank you, m'am. "'Tis better to give than receive," as old Pass'n Hole preached one Zunday. "He meaneth a toe in the ass!" cried out old "Sparker." 'A did, 'a did!' he exclaimed, while all who had heard him laughed. 'That's as true as 'm sitting yurr! "He meaneth a toe in the ass!," that's what old "Sparker" crieth out, in church and all! He was a heller, sometimes, was old "Sparker." I minds the time, when I was a b-boy, when "Sparker" and my father hanged up eighty-eight p-p-pence during a swampy harvest in this very house! 'Tis true what I be t-telling you! Tidden no lies, mind! You can write that d-d-down, for it be true!'

'Aw 'tes true what a zaid, 'tes true,' interrupted Brownie, in a voice suddenly melancholy, 'Eighty-eight pence – they drank eighty-eight pints between them one day, when t'was raining so they couldn't cut the corn – 'tis all true.'

'Aiy aiy!' cried a voice, "Twas in the Exeter "Gaz-at-ee," as "Sparker" allus called 'n.'

From another corner of the room, by the dart board, came cries of 'Will the Way-ver! Will the Way-ver!' A man standing there with a black felt hat on his head suddenly began to smoke furiously, and to give uneasy glances round the room. His pale face faintly flushed and sweating, the blacksmith, after several more cries of 'Will the Way-ver,' brushed the beer from his moustache, and muttering that he didn't know it, prepared to sing the song they had delighted to hear since early youth. For three years I had been asking the blacksmith to copy out the song for me, and for three years he had been declaring that I should have it to-morrow. He was busy, of course, with bellows and anvil and tempering trough, while his fowls walked among the litter of rusty iron on the coal-dusty floor. The blacksmith had heard his father and grandfather sing it; 'twas a song they old chaps zang up to pub when I was a boy. 'Tis an old village song, surenuff.'

One day he brought it to me, written in pencil, on some lined sheets of paper that may have been torn out of his grand-daughter's school exercise-book.

WILL THE WEAVER

Mother Mother I am married
better if I'd longer tarried
for the women do declare
that the breeches they will wear.

O loveing son no more discover
but I pray go home and love her
give my daughter wats her due
and let me hear no more of you.

Il give her gold
Il give her diet
Il give her all things if she is quiet
and if again she does rebel
Il take a stick and bang her well.

A neighbour ran all for to meet him
A purposely all for to vex him
saying Neighbour Neighbour Il tell thee how
and all I saw with the wife just now.

There I saw her and Will the Weaver
laying love with each the other
They lift up the latch of your own door
They went inside and I saw no more.

Then home he ran all in a wonder
tearing down the door like thunder
Get me some beer for I am dry
this to his wife he did reply.

o then he did his best endeavour
for to find out Will the Weaver
He searched the rooms and Chambers round
there wasint a soul there to be found.

then up the chimney straight he gazed
there sate Will like one Amazed
A wretched soul he spyed there
sitting across the chimney bar.

O I am glad that I have found thee
I will neighter hang nor drown thee
Butt Il stiffle thee with smoak
This he thought but nothing spoek.

Then he put in a roaring fire
just to please his own desire
and she cries out with free good Will
Husband Husband a man youl kill

o then he did put in more fuel
and she cries out my dearest jewl
if I am your lawfull wife
take him down and save his life

then off the chimney bar he took him
and most merrily he shook him
and every stroke these words he spoke
come yurr no more to spoil my smoak

there never was a chimney sweeper
half as black as Will the Weaver
face and hands and clothes likewise
he sent him home with two Black eyes.

During the evening our host beckoned me into the barrel-room and after filling my glass, he said in a low voice, 'I want you to do something for me. I want you to write about this Rabbit Supper, and put it up on the papers.'

I said, 'Yes, but I don't know if you would like it when it is written. I should write it exactly as I saw it.'

'You could get in up on the papers, couldn't you, Henry?'

'I will try, Charlie,' I replied, while his grandson, a boy of seven hiding his thoughts behind wide and simple eyes, smiled at me. He was keeping very still just then; blown out with ginger beer, he was hoping not to be noticed and sent to bed. It was nearly midnight – a roar was coming from the bar, but as it was a private party, the policeman's sense of duty had not prompted him to knock on the door at one minute past ten. Indeed, I had seen the policeman in the corner; I think it was the policeman who had said 'Proper' when I had finished singing *The Trumpeter*. I used to sing such songs in those days, when excited, 'with tremendous power and pathos,' as the local paper once reported.

Speeches of thanks to our host and hostess were then made; while emphasis was laid on the fact that such generosity was most remarkable. The speaker ended by saying that Mr. Taylor was a proper sport, and he hoped that Mr. Taylor

wouldn't feel it too much amiss that some hadn't turned up.

'Shouldn't 'v give it if I'd known,' the host was heard to mutter, while Mrs. Taylor, from her position behind the bar counter, said, 'Well, boys, you've enjoyed yourselves, haven't you?'

'Proper, proper,' exclaimed Brownie. 'It was the swatest little rabbut I ever tasted. It was!' 'You've had a good time, and plenty to ait?' insisted Mrs. Taylor.

'Aiy! aiy!' they answered, while the immensely polite Brownie said, 'Proper, proper. Couldn't be better, I don't care who hear me say it, I don't. 'Tes all proper. Aiy, aiy. 'Twas the swatest little rabbut——'

'The supper pleased you, didn't it?' persisted Mrs. Taylor, while Mr. Taylor shouted 'Order, please, gennulmen! Horder!'

'Order! Order! Gennulmen, please! Order for Mr. Taylor!'

Mr. Taylor was standing up beside me, in an heroic attitude. He looked as though only by a superior power had he managed to get on his feet to make his speech. I do not mean that he was partly overcome by the excitement; but that to make a speech was an ordeal for which he had been fortifying himself for the past two hours – if I had read his abstract gaze aright, and his periods of sudden hilarity. Mr. Taylor's face had gone pale; he stood transfixed, slightly shaking, and

stared before him with half-closed eyes. Whenever he laughed his eyes almost vanished; but he was not laughing now. He breathed deeply; his pipe clutched in his hand like a pistol pointed towards the top button of his waistcoat. In the silence he said, in a voice curiously hard and brittle, 'Gentlemen and sports.' He paused, while the sweat broke out on his brow. 'I want to say as how – I'm proud to-day – to see Harry Gammon back from China. Also that we and the Brish Empire was in the Great War' (a longer pause) 'that we're celebrating to-day.' (Pause). 'Every man here did his part well, gentlemen and customers all, and we went through and conquered, I'm glad to say.' He had gone paler; his gaze descended slowly, and met the eye of Harry Gammon who had recently come home from Malta, a time-expired soldier. 'Well, gentlemen and sports, we've all paid the supreme sacrament.' Pause.

I wrote his speech down as he spoke, it was so slowly delivered, with long pauses. In my notes, scrawled on the inside of a matchbox, the word *Incredible* is underlined thrice. I suppose I emphasised this as I realized that a literal transcription would smack of exaggeration and distortion for the purpose of obtaining comic effect. Fragments of what he had glanced at in his newspaper were passing out of Mr. Taylor's head: the usual Armistice attitude, dissension about the Revised Prayer Book confused with the term supreme sacrifice, etc.

'I hope you've all had a good time. I can't do no better than I have done.' (Pause, and cries of 'Hear, hear!') 'I'm sure we're all grateful, Mr. Taylor,' ''Twas the swatest little rabbut I ever——' etc. His voice lost its strained and brittle quality. 'Well, all I can say is, if they don't want to come they can——well do the other thing. I don't trouble! Noomye! That's all, gentlemen.' He sat down, rapidly swallowed a pint of beer handed to him by his sympathetic wife, and lit his pipe vigorously.

Then arose off the bench an old man with a grey beard, setting off a noble face: an old man with swelled hands, who had entered on shuffling wood-soled boots, with the aid of two sticks: an old man who had said nothing noticeable hitherto. The old man laboriously got on his bent legs, shuffled over to Mrs. Taylor, and solemnly shook hands with her.

'Thankee midear, thankee,' he said, and laboriously adjusted himself to go in the direction of Mr. Taylor, and shake his hand. He was too old to work, and the blessing of an old-age pension had kept him alive and free in his native village since before the War. I had had a conversation with him one early autumn about his solitary pig, the problem that worried him being, he felt he was going to die before long, he was very bad; and he could not decide whether or not to kill his pig, which would not be 'fit for kill' until December.

If he killed it before then, and lived over Christmas, it would be a loss; whereas, if he died, he would miss a nice bit of fresh meat, besides the bloody pie. It worried him much; and in the end he decided not to kill the pig before its time, but to let it grow until it was properly fat. That was two years previously: he had had two pigs since, and each autumn, when the leaves and the rains fell, his joints became more painful and the problem of the pig arose again in his mind.

'I've always found good neighbours,' he said, shaking the hand of Mr. Taylor, who said 'That's right.' 'But you must be a good neighbour yourself before you can expect good neighbours,' added the old man in his slow, thick voice. 'That's true!' cried Brownie. And when he had shuffled away, 'As good a man as any in the parish!' he declared, his eye staring as though to quell any dissent. 'As proper a man as ever trod ground!'

Some time afterwards Charlie Taylor, overcome by the risen memories of the past, was holding the hand of his wife, and singing. It sounds ungracious to liken his voice, or rather his prolonged notes of an (again) incredible melancholy, to the howling of one of the dogs of which he was so fond and proud; but really, it was exactly like that. Moreover, his dogs in the yard began singing in sympathy, and when I went outside for a moment into Church Street it was difficult to tell which was which. On my return I saw the tears streaming down the faces

of Mr. and Mrs. Taylor. They were overcome by the power of old days together; they saw their lives as something that inevitably declines and vanishes, made beautiful by tenderness and union; their tears dissolved the things that unhappy men and women say and do to each other. He called her 'Mother.' I felt nearer to him then than I had ever felt before. He was a sportsman, a badger-digger; I have written an account of a badger-dig in another chapter, as I saw and felt it. I knew Charlie Taylor neither saw nor felt like that. 'Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.'

Epigraph. This description was written, except for later additions and revisions, during the period at bay before *The Pathway*, a period now happily relict. Charlie is now my good friend. One day I saw the great green arms of a fern growing in a corner of his stable yard, and was surprised to hear him say, 'I love that fern. I wouldn't have anyone shift it for any money. Noomye!' Later I learned of his regard for a thrush that sang outside his window every morning; and, most revealing of all, that he hated the idea of a badger having its throat cut after being dug out. 'If I had my way, I'd let every one go, I would!' He loved his dogs, especially 'Old Jack the Mullah,' which used to lie in the sun in the road, scarred and toothless and happy, heedless of motor-car wheels. Charlie gave up the drinking of spirits; and when I saw him

last he was mellow and humorous; he loved the village life; a shot at a rabbit or partridge, a clay-pigeon shoot, a quiet glass of beer, a game of skittles, pride in his grandson, and a sleep in trousers and shirt-sleeves every afternoon.

'MUGGY,' THE RABBIT AGENT

From the high ground of Ox's Cross many hundreds of fields are seen, covering the slopes of the hills like a far-lying patchwork of irregular green and brown pieces stitched together with thick dark wool; some fields bright with sunlight, others dull under distant clouds. Most of these fields, varying in extent from a rood to fifty acres, are enclosed by wide banks of earth and stone, topped with hedges of beech, ash, thorn, elm, furze, and bramble.

In every one of these banks are many holes; they are tunnelled from gate to gate. Few of the tunnels are straight or level. They rise and fall and twist round inner pieces of rock. Each system has several outlet and inlet holes, with one or more bolt holes used only in panic, hidden by the grass and the plants on the bank.

Sometimes the rabbits, which scratch out these systems, called burys, cause the earth and stones of the banks to fall down; when sheep and cattle tread the breaks into gaps, and wander from their rightful pasture. The rabbits nibble the roots of

turnip, mangle, and rape; they eat the young corn, the clover, the cabbages, the peas; they dig for potatoes, and rasp the bark of fruit trees. They multiply rapidly – a doe having five or six litters a year, with five or six young to each litter.

Part of the area of these fields seen from Ox's Cross, which come by gates to narrow lanes leading past farms and hamlets to the roadways, are traversed from October to February by a Ford van, loaded with rectangular wicker baskets, each bearing two stout hazel-wood bars on which are strung the crossed hindlegs of dead rabbits – a hindleg being thrust between the bone and sinew of the other. The van stops at the cottages of trappers, and other places where rabbits are collected. The collector gets down from beside the driver, examines the rabbits, selects what he will take, weighs them on a spring balance, and buys them by weight. The price in a normal season varies from 5½d. to 7d. a pound, including the skin.

In his round the buyer is regular and punctual, and if he knows he will change his time he sends postcards to the trappers, who are busy men. The rabbits, which are sent by train to one of the largest Midland factory cities, must be slightly injured – that is, caught by the forepaws only. A rabbit trapped by the hindlegs often strips the flesh in its struggles; and is not marketable. In five months the van carries rabbits to the value of £6,000; that is, between 120,000 and 150,000

rabbits are sent away in the wicker baskets. Actually, double the number may be caught during this period, but buzzards and crows 'break abroad' some of them by day, the fox and the badger take them by night. Many are trapped lightly by the forepaw, and escape. Indeed, one rabbit in five packed in the baskets has a forepaw already missing.

In our village there are several trappers. One of them pays for the trapping rights of a farm by giving so many weeks' labour to the farmer in summer. A good trapper visits his gins at day-break and in the evening, but some go along their banks only three times in a week, having other work to do. During the first hours of its agony of struggling a rabbit fills the night with crying; but terror and pain, long-borne with hunger and perhaps the beating of rain and wind, bring the ease of little-knowing.

Besides the regular trappers, there are farmers who hold from seven to ten or twenty acres of land, and keep two or three cows, with a sow and her farrow. Sometimes they bring home a couple of rabbits, taken in their half-dozen rusty gins tilled for rat or rabbit, or shot in the early morning, or caught by the dog at dimmity. The 'bad ones' they eat themselves; others may be offered at the doors of one or the other of the bungalows or small modern houses built since the Great War in and around the village. Those unsold rabbits are hung

up until an old man called 'Muggy Smith of Cryde' knocks with his stick on the door, standing there with a basket.

'Good morning to you, ma'm. Any rabbuts to-day, please? Thank you very much.' It may be 'Good morning, midear. I hope you'm very well. Will you please to ask your mother if she has any rabbut skins? I'm paying three ha'pence to-day – rabbut skins is come back.' Or, 'Rabbut skins is gone up – I'm giving tuppence to-day, if you please. That's right, ma'm, thank you very much.'

Between the two villages he walks slowly, giving a cheery good-day to all he meets on the way. Sometimes he has a joke to tell, or a riddle to ask. 'Now, sir, let me ask you a question please. Can you tell me what it is that is longer when cut off at both ends? I am asking you a plain question, if you please. Just listen to what I be asking, if you please, What is it that grows longer when cut off at the ends? That's it, if you can answer me.'

The riddle may have been asked before, and Muggy forgotten; but no matter. As with his other riddle ('Why did Gladstone wear yellow braces?' 'To keep his trousers up, if you please, sir. That's it!') the answer is not known.

''Tis a grave,' says Muggy, moving away; and stopping, to explain that 'in his kid days' he saw a coffin lowered in Ham churchyard, but coming to rest on the eastern and western edges, so that it had to be dug longer while the mourners waited

around the pit. 'Yes, sir. That be the explanation. Good day, sir.'

He has no remarks or comments to offer on the actions of other people, and is not concerned with your own. 'I don't want to know your own business, midear. No, sir. 'Tis no concern of mine what other volks be doing of. I don't want to know their business.'

He was born at the inn below the sharp turn of the road, which stands opposite the club-room steps where now he rests, perched above the stream; but as a young man he sold the inn, and went to America, coming back to end his days in the village. For some years when first I knew him he had a shanty in the corner of a hillside field, which he reached by climbing the 'ditched' wall on juts of stone. The shanty was as tall as himself, but not much longer or wider than a coffin. His bed was a shelf, and he cooked on an oil stove covered with soot, as the stones of the ditched wall outside were covered with moss. His larder was a box on a post; the rats raided it regularly, once gnawing a way into the precious food within. Beside the larder was his letter-box. In the shanty he shaved and washed and ate, kept his accounts with the rabbit collector, wrote his occasional letters, stored his rabbit skins; until the local sanitary authorities found and condemned it.

He migrated to the village up the valley, renting in Ham a two-roomed cot for £3 a year. But after

a year the landlord 'rose the rent' another £1, and Muggy, whose income from rabbits and their skins, telegram tips, water-cress and crabs in summer, could not meet this increase, had to move. He made a room in a cottage opposite, long since disused as a dwelling, wherein sacks of artificial manure, faggots, and garden tools were kept by the landlord of the Higher House.

His journeys between the two villages begin to take longer, his jokes and riddles are rarer; but his cheerful courtesy still brightens the wayside. Everyone knows Muggy, and is sure of him – no casting of eyes on the road or the hedge, awaiting the unsure and awkward moment of glancing up, and acknowledging that it is a fine day, or what dirty weather we're having, or that it looks like more rain. 'Muggy Smith of Cryde' is plain as a field is plain, plough, arrish, or pasture; a rare and simple being, warped to no property, true to himself, and therefore to all men. Shakespeare would have loved him.

Epigraph. Four years after the above was written, my old friend Muggy Smith of Cryde fell down and died as he was going into his hut, at the age of 75 years. During his life he asked me frequently not to omit, when I 'put him in the book,' the facts that he was 'proper wild' as a young man, and a great brandy drinker, which had resulted in the loss of the freehold inn owned by his forefathers,

and his wanderings round the world; and that he had 'conquered his craving.' And I am sure Muggy was the first to laugh at the joke of his own funeral in August, 1929, when his coffin could not be lowered into its grave because it was too long.

THE VACANT FIELDS

When it leaves the adjoining hamlet of Cot, the road from Ham rises its lonely way along the back of the high ground, suddenly overlooking miles of estuarial flat and marsh – the old wide river-bed – lying green and misty to the shining sea. Farmhouse, cottages, barns, are left behind. The narrow road, with its ferny banks topped by low ragged hedges, bordered by ivy-frustrated telegraph poles, is empty as the sloping fields. The solitude of the sky is upon the hill. A coal cart, or the red mail van, may pass; but the place remains as it has been for centuries. Here the spirit, confined and dulled in a house, can spread into its ancient elements, and be thoughtless in its true life.

Usually when I travel along the road I am on wheels, and in a hurry, to get a new wireless battery, or a kettle, or a new bottle for the baby (remembering 'a No. 5 leech-bite teat'), or something that takes me from the fields. A quick glance at the distant mist arising off the Pebble Ridge, at the lines of white surf along the shallow coast, at the sea at high tide resembling an immense grey skate whose tail is the estuary, at a kestrel hovering

down the hillside; these glimpses are all I may take for renewal until the steep Norman's hill descends before me. But to-day I am free again, pressing the turf under my feet: I may forget shops and houses and paper and ink, and free myself into the wind that buoys the lark aslant its shrill rising song.

There is a new colour on many of the fields, which lie to the far sea like a faded Joseph's coat. A heavy pallor hangs over the hills, for the snow clouds are waiting, and the winds which brought them are gone. Above the sea the light is copper-coloured; the headland is blue and distinct. A swirl of birds like snowflakes drift over the newest dark brown furrows a mile away, following a tiny moving man and horses; the gulls are scrambling for wireworms and chafer-grubs.

Pale green of pasture, yellow-grey of arrish, or stubble, these are being changed into new dark brown rectangles of plough. There are not enough gulls to float and drop screaming behind all the ploughs. The many small fields are divided by grassy banks topped with thorns and plashed elm and ash saplings. England has had many owners! As I walk south, dreaming of the centuries that have known just such a February ploughing scene as this, the soft rustling scrape of a ploughshare on damp earth and stone comes over the hedge in front. It is a sound that opens the furrow of spring in the heart. Two horses draw the plough,

the barrowquails swing to their sturdy trampling, the ploughman walks behind. Beautiful it is to watch the travelling wavelet of earth turning up and heaving over. With the sounds of a myriad blended small rootlets breaking, the coulter cuts through speedwell, bindweed, dandelion, stroyle, and rotting sheep-nibbled roots of rape. At the headland the ploughman cries hoarsely, '*Whoa! Git back you!*': the horses turn slowly and patiently: the curved shares, like petals of a great silver sunflower, change over: a new furrow is started. Five wagtails and a chaffinch flit from clod to clod along it. The brown earth takes a lustre from the metal in the sun; it is very beautiful; but soon the frosts and the dews will break and dull that living shine.

Two days after my happy walk, I went again on foot over the fields. The clouds were gone, the sky radiant with the hot blinding splash of the sun. And yet it was not the dream-giving sun of my walk two days since. The day was blank, the sunlight harsh. I noticed without real interest that lapwings walked over the distant fields, pausing to watch, and running forward to pick up insects or worms. They walked quickly, their greenish plumage concealing them while they paused. Gulls walked heavily behind, as though shepherding the flocks. Each gull kept its yellow eye on the same birds. Occasionally a lapwing would nip the head of a worm, and pull it from its hole; the waiting gull would dash at the bird, and filch the

worm from under its beak. Noises like the scrupeting of ungreased axles arose over the field, the threats of chasing gulls.

Curlews stalked in other fields, with starlings, and golden plover. The gulls were spread out amongst them, not searching themselves, but exploiting the labours of weaker birds. Such was the law of life: the race was to the strong, and the meek would inherit the earth only when the earth inherited them dust to dust. Now I was walking almost as a task. The fields were as I had left them two days before, partly ploughed. The ploughs lay against the hedges. In such fine sunny weather, it was strange to see them lying idle. The sunlight hurt my eyes. I turned back home, my mind like a sick squirrel in a cage.

On my way back to the village I saw a cat sitting on a bank, watching for a rabbit to come forth; and in another field a cattle dog was loping with a spaniel down the hedge. The cattle dog turned tail and ran away when it saw me, but the spaniel watched me from behind a furze bush. They, too, were after rabbits. Then I saw a barn-owl drifting over the hedge in front, as it sought mice in the sunlight, and farther on, I saw its mate. Nothing unusual in any of these sights, but they gave a strangeness to the deserted ploughs, the empty fields. My head was heavy as brass in the sunshine.

In Cot, by the red letter-box in the barn-wall,

I met the oil-man, who, with his horse and his dog and his cart of brooms and pails and crockery, passed that way once a week. I remarked the silence of the place, the waiting gulls, the poaching cat and dogs, the daylight-flying owls (which no farmer would shoot, knowing their habits).

'I can't sell no oil,' he told me, 'There be no one to answer my knocks. 'Tis a wind-floating business, I reckon, this influenza, for every farmer and plooman in Cot be to bed with it. 'Tis the same to Morte and Cryde and Crosstree, 'tis the same wherever I go: the schools be closed, with no one to teach, and the childer all to bed. And I've seen other owls about on my round, too – the white owl, you know, what roosts in the linhays. 'Tis so quiet in the farmyards that they venture forth, that's my way of thinking. 'Twas never known, I reckon, such an epidemic of influenza, since the last year of the War when ten of my mates died in the Veterinary Corps in France.'

He sneezed; and feeling a shiver down my back, I hastened home.

1925

VILLAGE INNS

2. THE HIGHER HOUSE

When Mr. Taylor – or Charlie as I was first privileged to call him on the night of the Rabbit Supper – had first settled in the Lower House, he bought a pony and dog-cart, some ferrets, and a couple of terriers. I used to watch the pony being 'broken-in' by the young man who drove the first 'Taxi' in the village in 1919. He used to canter the pony up and down Church Street, tugging on its mouth, cursing it, hitting it over the head with a stick; Mr. Taylor watched, knowing nothing of ponies, except that this one was a booger to go. 'I tugs to the right, but it won't go right: bloomin' thing's no use to me,' said Mr. Taylor. Soon after the Rabbit Supper he asked me if I would care to ride it, and I said yes, and thanked him. It knew none of the usual aids, it nearly pulled my left arm out of its socket, it threw me into the stream at Cryde, and chased a mare across half-a-dozen fields, most of them barb-wired, with me as gooseberry on its back. It was what is called technically a rig; and was certainly what Charlie had described it. Soon afterwards he sold it, and bought a motor-

car in which, periodically, he used to go off with his famous terrier, the Mad Mullah, badger-digging. Often he invited me to go with him: he felt lonely, I think, and knew I was lonely, too: but I never went with him.

In those early days, neither of us felt easy with the other. Our sets of ideas, the motive forces of our lives, were different. I knew I was not good company, not a sportsman. With the landlord of the Higher House I was more at home. Albert Gammon was truly of the soil; he had the natural courtesy and charm of the countryman interested in a number of things. Pleasant it was to sit in the Higher House during the winter evenings. Sometimes I wrote parts of my books on the long table, whose lines of grain stood up sharp with much scrubbing. The room had a low ceiling and a lime-ash floor. A great beam, a single tree rough-shewn and showing the five-century-old adze-marks along its length, crossed the ceiling. Once upon a time it was the habit of a local landowner to ask strangers to the inn the height of that beam. He would say that he was five feet eleven inches high: now could the other pass a hand over the top of his head and judge the space? It was a great joke to push upwards, and to crush the stranger's fingers between bone and wood. He was a big man, with fair hair and ruddy cheeks, and a long nose. Another joke of this gentleman was to creep upon a man sitting in a private place, open the wooden

hatch in the hole in the back wall, and strike into the opening with a handful of nettles, causing shouts of indignation and rage. 'Was there ever a fight over that?' I asked. 'Noomye. For —— was a girt strong fellow, strong as a bullock. He just did it for divilment. But 'a was a proper gennulman, for 'a would give the chap a gutful of beer afterwards.'

'Queer things were done by some of "the gentry" in they days,' the blacksmith told me one night, as he sat in the shadow of the corner seat near the door. 'I minds the time when Squire Priddle lived out to Annswell. A proper pup he was, too!' The squire lived in the white manor house among the pines in the valley beyond Ox's Cross.

'One day,' said the blacksmith, 'the squire went into a barn where a man was wimbling wheat in the winnowing machine. "Turn the handle the other way," he suggested, "and see if it will work." The man said that it would not work. "How d'ye know if you haven't tried? Turn it backwards, and let's find out." The man turned it backwards. Get out, of course it wouldn't work!' said the blacksmith, 'and the chap had to do all his work over again, for the doust was all mixed up with the corn. And the Squire, he just walked away and forgot all about it. A proper pup, he was!

'A terrible obstinate man he was. You couldn't tell him anything. One day he had a oaken post which wasn't long enough, and he told the men to grease it in the middle and tug at it, to lengthen it.

He kept the men tugging for a quarter of an hour, and proper fools they thought themselves, too; but they had to do it, 'cause the Squire employed them, d'you see. A proper pup, he was; chucked all his money away and went to live in a cottage, and drank away what was left until he hadn't a penny piece to his name.'

Death from drink, sometimes in extreme poverty, was the end of many West Country squires towards the end of the Victorian age.

On the bar of dark-painted wood was fixed a nickel engine for drawing corks; it was seldom used. On shelves behind the bar stood earthenware jars holding whiskey and brandy. A set of pewter was hung on nails below them – quart, pint, half-pint, noggin, half-noggin, quarter noggin; they had hung there for more than a century. Through the door beside the bar could be seen the 18- and 36-gallon casks in the barrel room. When first I knew the Higher House we drank from pink or blue china mugs; later, only from glasses. The air in the barrel room, which opened in to the kitchen and sitting-room (the 'best room,' seldom used) was less thick than in the bar, and here farmers went to talk quietly with the landlord. Here the mild-voiced schoolmaster came for his nightly drink and half-an-hour's talk and smoke before going out, as he had quietly come, through the sitting-room.

The windows were rarely opened in the evening, even in summer. They preferred a fug of twist and

shag tobacco, stale air, and dim-seen faces. Being tall, the dim, hot, filthy air made my eyes smart, and my breathing uneasy. It was the same in the Lower House, but not so bad, as the ceiling was higher there. Even the key-hole of the Higher House was stopped by a wad of paper: for the air of heaven will get where it can, and before the plugging of the key-hole it used to scream into the hot smoky room. Men began to come to the Higher House about eight o'clock, when talk would be low and reflective, when a speaker would be listened to. Perhaps the landlord or one of his daughters would be leaning over the bar, talking to old Muggy in the corner under the lamp, waiting for a game of whist. His hat was weather-worn, like his face and hands – he was never without his stick and handyman's basket. After wandering round the world he had come back to the village of his forefathers. Muggy had no convictions about life, having outworn them all.

Both in the Lower and Higher Houses the game of table skittles was played. Nine wooden pins were set up on a diamond-square block of wood in the tray, and a wooden ball, on a string swivelled to the top of a stick a yard or more tall, was swung round the stick in a wide parabola which the experts repeated almost every time – with the result that the pin at the apex of the nine was struck a glancing blow of such a niceness that it knocked over four pins to the right, while the ball, scarcely checked,

scattered the four on the left. That was the desired result – a 'floor.' Sometimes two or three pins remained standing, and were 'scutt' by the second ball, resulting in the satisfactory 'spare' for the third and final ball – a 'spare' being the nine pins set up again. Three balls each player, turn and turn about. The score was pegged with burnt matches on a block of wood drilled with four lines of holes – up and down for each player. Game was best of three up-and-down bouts; usually played for a pint of sixpenny ale.

Charlie of the Lower House was one of the best players in the parish. I have seen him 'scatt' nine pins with one ball again and again. I doubt if he would have been equally skilful on the table of the Higher House – but he entered the Higher House as seldom as Albert entered the Lower House. It was the spirit of the village.

Sometimes the village of Ham played Cryde, or the team from Cross Tree came up and played for the local championship. Then it was most interesting to watch the styles of the players; the long swings, the neat and precise cross taps, the easy circles that just clipped the three outside pins, like a sharp scythe laying ripe corn.

On Saturday nights the Higher House was usually so crowded that the skittling tray was put on the small circular table in the corner; its usual stance was on the long table that stood almost the length of the room. In the midst of the smoke and noise

of these nights, between half-past nine and ten o'clock, a strange figure would unobtrusively appear among the ruddy-faced men. It responded to, but seldomed answered directly to, the name of 'Appy 'Arry. This man was small and thin, pale and woeful-eyed, hollow of cheek and like a black bat flapping out of the night as he slipped into the room in his long frock coat and dragging boots. Sometimes the ankles of his sockless feet were raw with chafing. He had a small thin sallow face, with black uneasy eyes, and in a frail voice he answered the rough jests, all of a personal kind, of the men. He would pull a paper out of his bag and hold it opposite his customer's waistcoat until the twopence was put into his hand. Sometimes he produced a small chipped lens, looking like the glass of an electric torch, and screwing it into an eye, appeared intently to be reading one of his papers. Then he would glance up, catch someone's eye, and in a sad thin voice would offer the limp, smudged sheet. 'Paper? Paper? Mr. Peto's speech against the Reds? Look!' Afterwards he slouched off to his home eight miles away, which he would reach at one o'clock in the morning, with his bag and frock coat lining bulging with paper scraps he had picked up by the wayside.

In the Higher and Lower Houses I heard many tales of falcons, foxes, badgers, ravens, men, which afterwards I wrote as stories. In the winter night, with rain driven against the windows by the south-

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west wind, and the room heated by the pale blue circular flames of an American oil-stove – so that a blast of air smote the incomer as he opened the door – I used to sit with Tom Gammon, who knew more about rabbits and ferrets than any man in the parish; a thin, blue-eyed, narrow-headed man, rude in argument as a schoolboy; generous and spendthrift, and very proud of his children. When, during the war, he thought he would be conscripted into the Army, Tom grew thin; he had lived in the parish all his life, and knew every tree and rabbit-bury, and every stone in the wall. To leave his wife and children – the idea was deathly. It is sweet and proper to want to live in your own village. The shadow passed from over his home, and Tom, as a mason, earned more money. Sometimes on Saturday nights, when he had travelled from Higher to Lower House about half-a-dozen times, he would whisper proudly in my ear, in a thickening voice, 'Best childer i' th' parish I've got. No whoring in my house. Proper maids they always was. No whoring in my house. I never allowed it. That eldest maid – Bob Baggot's wife – her be the most grammatical speaker i' th' parish. Ed'cation, that's it. Most grammatical speaker i' th' parish, her be. Her saith long words ba'nt grammatical speaking: but her can say long words if her's a mind to, you know. Splendid sons and daughters I've got. Best childer i' th' parish.' His voice would thicken, and drop away. 'Wull,

oomwards', he would grunt, and rise, pull open the door, pull it to behind him, impelled by urgent reasons; and afterwards, oomwards, homewards – thirty steps up Stony Hill to his cottage.

Tom Gammon's elder brother, Willy Gammon, was another of my friends. He was gentle and sympathetic and sweet-voiced, except when he sang! One night the door of the Higher House was pulled open, and sounds like the screeching crow of a cock were flung in. Willy got up obediently, and followed his wife; it was raining outside, and all the boots of his many children leaked. Poor Mrs. Gammon, the village used to say: her's had a proper hard struggle to bring up all they children!

In one corner used to sit 'Thunderbolt' Carter, who spoke little, being deaf, and afraid to commit himself. 'Aw haw,' he said once, before a General Election, hearing that a Labour candidate was standing for the first time, 'Not they ould Socials! No good being Social! Aw, haw, I won't have it about they ould Socials!' He read the weekly local paper, every word of it, including advertisements, for which he paid twopence. When he retired he sold one of his two fields to Billy Goldsworthy – every other man in the village owned a bit of land – and the two sat up all night, by the light of a candle, counting and recounting £120 in small silver, sixpences and shillings. The purchaser distrusted banks, preferring to keep his money in a box under his bed.

Then there was Mr. Tanberry, the genial Mr. Tanberry – but he shall have a character part all to himself elsewhere: Cryde still remembers Mr. Tanberry, one of its former mayors, who was hospitable to the extent of £200 for beer within a few weeks. And Mr. Copp, one of the Rating Committee, an individual with a long nose and cold eyes who under-rated human nature as he under-rated his own property, who, seeking re-election, used to appear in the Higher and Lower Houses just before the elections for the local councils, and ask everyone to have a drink with him – and nearly everyone did. The Zeale brothers – now unhappily parted since the bottle was thrown at the clock; Mr. Chanter the serious and garrulous and inflexible District Councillor, and a score of others without subtlety, plain-spoken men mostly with understanding and tolerance for human acts – unless they were particularly concerned, when their understanding narrowed to their own points of view; not forgetting 'Tanglilegs' Pearse, the stuttering trapper who at mowing and reaping used to crawl home at night on hands and knees.

Lately, 'Tiger' Kift, one of my early friends, has given up coming to the Higher House; I used to see him frequently during the first years after the war – a fierce-eyed fisherman, nervously tapping his foot on the floor and shouting with sudden gusty guffaws. Tiger used to scale the precipice for the young of raven and peregrine falcon. He was

already old when first I knew him, and had not been to North Side for many years, except once to show a farmer the holes drilled in the rocks under the cliffs where his ropes, made fast to lobster pots, had been hitched. His father used to take the young peregrines before him; and Tiger told me, with great guffaws, how he remembered as a boy going with his parents to Bag Hole, above which was the eyrie at the back of a ledge of rock. His father and mother had quarrelled that morning, and when the man was thirty feet down the rope, he looked up, and saw her leaning over, sawing at the rope with a carving knife she had hidden in the basket. He watched one strand snap, and then he yelled, 'You wait! This rope cost good money! You booger, you! I'll trim 'ee when I come up!' The words made the wife laugh, and she recovered her good humour, and ceased to cut the rope. The sea was three hundred feet below the cliff top.

Another friend of mine was old Granfer Jimmy Carter, bent double, who was miserable because he could work no more in the fields, since his rupture a year before. In his garden, with fork or shovel or drill-line, he was happy, although most of the time he stood about. One year he planted out a row of Stocks and Sweet-Williams in his garden, and his son Revvy was silent when he saw that: father had never done that before. He died a few weeks later, and Revvy tills his garden; and the stocks are nearly gone.

Sometimes, on entering the inn, I would see standing there a tall and narrow man with large feet and hands, long and loose of arm and leg, with a thin prominent nose, like a red lobster-claw, between two eyes intensely blue. His sandy hair stood up untidily on his long narrow head. He spoke in a loud cracked voice – he jerked his head like a grotesque hen as he spoke. His conversation with me always sounded like a series of astonished squeaks. This was Clibbit Kifft, a farmer, whom one passed in the lanes, riding an Exmoor pony eleven hands high, with his immense leather-and-iron boots on the long thin legs only a few inches off the ground. He was said to be a generous man, who would 'give anything away'; and he combined with this unusual generosity a temperament that was amiable in his own farmhouse only when he was drunk, and not always then. When sober his temper was uncertain; he was liable at any moment to thrash and kick his horses, his dogs, his wife, his children, to upset the table, smash up the dinner, throw about what chairs, plates, cutlery and pictures had remained unbroken in his home. He had several children. His eldest boy on reaching the age of fourteen at once ran away from home. His wife was plump, with fresh cheeks and big brown eyes of a maid untroubled and tender; but she talked of him in a hopeless voice, without the consolation of happiness after death that is assured to some church and chapel folk. She said

she hoped he would die soon. Her younger children were plump, and had her brown eyes and rosy cheeks. The girls had short hair, like the boys, and wore spectacles through which they squinted. The mother cut the hair of her children with sheep-shears; in her forearm were two scars where once the points were driven by her sober husband. What gnawed at his inner life, I used to wonder. 'His vather were the same before him, and treated him rough: 'tis quite hopeless, you see,' said Mrs. Kifft to me once during the auction at Fig Tree Farm. Below the farm the old Jacobean water-mill was grinding the barley as we walked down to Cryde together; the building trembled with its inner stone-thunder. There was an old runner-stone lying in the grass; and the pond above. Many references to these things occurred in the Chapel Sunday-afternoon sermons: but when I passed by, and heard fragments of these easy judgments, I used to wonder what it was that gnawed at the inner life of the father.

The men being paid for the week's work on Saturday, those nights were the loudest with laughter and shouted talk. They came to the inn washed and shaved, wearing the clean shirts which would be worn until the next Saturday afternoon. Collars were not worn; Sunday was collar day. Studs or buttons held the neck-bands neat; they were loose from Monday to Friday. At first they talked quietly, sitting on the benches. It might be about the good grass of Higher Ham fields,

which let for £4 10s. an acre from 1st May to 1st September – grass that 'topped your boots' in the first week of May; unlike the fields of Lower Ham, only fit for sheep, 'no bullock bite in it.' At nine o'clock the low-beamed room would be thick with men, their smoke and their dark clothes and their voices, the scrape and clamp of iron-shod boots on the stone floor, and sudden laughter – real laughter, not the chuckles of subtle wit, but the bellows of plain humour. At half-past nine most of the men would be talking at once, pushing with loud voices their opinions down the throats of men who were only half listening, and awaiting the least pause – sometimes not even waiting – to give their own opinions on the matter – the opinions being usually what they had read in newspapers, or what they had heard their fathers tell before them, were the subject of politics. On questions of the fields and the village each man had a deep store of knowledge, although it was often in dispute. Some lied deliberately, if their pockets were concerned.

Fists were banged on the table; mugs and glasses were rattled for refilling; the whist-players under the yellow lamp slapped down their dirty, worn cards, and the losing pair usually argued after each hand, 'Why didden 'ee play out th'ace before? Corbooger, gone to bed wi'n!' 'No 'twasn't so, it kept back his trump, don't 'ee see? If 'ee'd trumped that king o' glubs, us'd won the game!' The losing pair paid for a pint of beer each for the winners.

None of the beer in the Higher or Lower House was home-brewed as in the old days; it was chemical stuff, no taste of malted barley in it. It left a tang in the mouth, as though saltpetre had been added to it, to give a false thirst for more. Perhaps the saltpetre provided the dividends of the brewery companies.

By ten o'clock, when the landlord, who had been a corporal of a yeomanry regiment, the North Devon Hussars, whistled 'lights out,' and said to his customers 'Time, chaps!' the fug was loud with song – always some voices bellowing longer than others, and making discords. Out they went, bidding loud or quiet good-nights, some to stand on the rock outside and argue for ten or twenty minutes, while the helmet of the constable, still against the southern stars when the first man had pulled open the door, moved down the short hill to the Lower House. A tale caused much laughter against the new policeman (when absent). Mr. Bullcornworthy, as he was always respectfully called, was said to be eager for 'cases.' One summer night Mr. Bullcornworthy heard snoring in the churchyard, and went among the mounds and stones to arrest the drunk man sleeping there. Mr. Bullcornworthy searched for a long time, finding no one; for drunkenness is rare in the Higher and Lower Houses as good fellowship is common, and the noise had come from young white owls in the elms, awaiting the return of the old birds with mice and voles.

THE BUZZARDS

Below the terrace of the manor house of Pidickswell is a stone wall, and beyond the wall is a field. I used to pass that way in the early summer morning, and saw three or four – sometimes five – big brown birds perching on the wall, at intervals of perhaps thirty or forty yards. They were buzzards; base hawks nearly two feet long, with small heads and large yellow feet. The black claws of their toes were curved like sickles. The grip of a foot would tear and gather the skin of a man's hand. They were waiting on the wall for rabbits to come out of their holes, called burys, in the bank opposite.

They waited patiently; they may have been gorged. Sometimes head and shoulders were moved as a hawk peered down with its peculiar dipping movement which raised the neck feathers, and gave, in my spy-glass, the impression of the bird having no neck. At length the amber-ringed eyes – the yellow mark of the hawks which distinguishes them from true falcons, whose eyes are dark and full – so sensitive to movement, saw something fifty yards away. It was the head of a rabbit. The hawk waited until the animal moved

away from its hole, and then jumped off the wall and flew toward it, flying low over the ground.

At a distance of fifty yards it is possible that the rabbit sees its danger, and escapes. I have watched through the glass as a buzzard made a sudden flapping leap from the wall to grab a rabbit in the potato patch below. There was much flapping and struggling, in which both bird and animal lost control of their bowels. The stronger and heavier bird was drawn among the haulms, but the big buck rabbit could not escape, the grip of one foot crushing its face and piercing its eye.

A buzzard eats beetles and lizards and snakes. The keenness of the bird's eyesight may be gauged by what I saw one morning from Span Head, on Exmoor. The hawk was soaring in circles, one cutting the other, about five hundred feet above the heather and ling. A steady wind was streaming over the summit of the hill where I lay motionless in the first south wind of the year. In one turn it flapped and checked, head to wind and wide wings bent anchor-shape to lessen the lifting surface. There it hung, lifting and depressing wing and tail and hanging still. From five hundred feet to fifty feet it fell, slowly and heavily, with feet dangling. I tried to move not even an eyelid. The buzzard sank to within ten feet. It was so near that I could see the markings of its plumage, the tips of its pinion tips upspread like fingers, the nervous opening and closing of its yellow feet.

When it dropped to earth I moved an arm and shouted. It swerved violently, beat its wings – spanning nearly five feet – and glided downward over the brow of the hill. Where it had dropped the ground was bare, except for white and black stalks of dead heather. In this dry desert a small green beetle crept laboriously, its hooked feet pushing the black grains of the soil. It was half an inch long, but the hawk had espied it from a height of five hundred feet.

Judging from food brought to nestlings, buzzards seldom catch other birds. They take moles, waiting until they see a heaving of earth, and plunging their talons into the loose mound. Rat-tails and sections of viper and grass-snake are usually found under its nest. Once I saw a buzzard rip up a large rat with a stroke of the hooked upper mandible. Frogs also are eaten, and crane-flies. The rabbit is its chief food.

The buzzard is often mobbed by gulls and crows. I have watched a tom-tit chasing a buzzard – the tom-tit was five inches across the wings. Often the wild and plaintive cry of this common hawk is heard from the sky; truly they inherit the air at evening, and your thought goes with them, as on outheld wings they soar higher and higher under the first glint of stars, tranquil on the sunset winds over the oak-wood valleys and the high downs above the western sea.

OLD WOOLACOTT

'Ah well, us must all take the rough wi' the smooth, must'nt us?' said Old Woolacott in a voice wherein still faintly trickled the sweetness of his simple and unvaried life. He stood huddled on the threshold of the cottage he was leaving. He spoke through bare gums, and when he had finished, his shapeless lips went on opening and partly closing. The skin of his face and neck, from which nine hairs, each a solitary, wandered out in curls and twists, was drawn and rutted with extreme age. A blue hand, half covered by a woollen mitten, clasped a stick which bore part of the weight of his body muffled in thick waistcoat and pea-jacket of West-of-England cloth, and held him from swaying. He was waiting for the cart he had hired to take himself, his wife, and his belongings to another village five miles away.

''Twas only four years agone us had to go from t'other place in Lower 'Am, wasn't it?'

I nodded, remembering that cottage in Lower Ham. It used to stand beside two cottages built together with a common wall, its back half-turned

away from them, and leaving a wedge of space scarcely wide enough at its point for a cat to slip through. Perhaps its cob walls had been slapped-up on an ownerless space, while jealous and less bold eyes regarded it with curious resentment. It stood by itself, a little offset from the others, a monument to the dominant spirit of the village, which is the spirit of property, whose roots are underground, and the sap rising therefrom is bitter. Resentment of what a neighbour may come to own before yourself; hard secrecy of what money you have got, either on deposit in the bank, or in the chest under the bed (in silver pieces, perhaps gold, but no paper money); envy and resentment of those who get on ('What do'm want all that for? Haven't they enough already?') A spirit that having built the chapel, decreed that Old Woolacott and other common labouring men owning nothing should sit in the back seats; that maintains therein the letter which, being fixed, killeth natural growth. A spirit that is hard as the rock on which the cottages are built; but rock softens and crumbles in time.

The sense of property in the village is not kind to the human nature it dominates. It is less crude to-day than when the cottage was built four or five hundred years ago, for wider ideas are in the air, and drifting into far places; but the cottage with its back turned away from its older neighbours, with its wedge of space through which the wind

moaned and sighed in weest nights, was an expression of the village-spirit made manifest before all eyes. 'Do what you like, so long as you keep away from my property' – this was the answer I received from an old woman on her way back from church, when I sought permission to walk on her grass the next morning for the purpose of hauling on a rope to raise a wireless pole, which was to stand against the wall dividing our gardens. I had to wait for this yeoman's daughter to die before I could hear Beethoven from the Albert Hall in London; and then the ten-minute trespass on the long rank withering grass was observed by 'Stroyle' George, and reported to the heir, a builder of rows of houses in a seaside town, who wrote and warned me to keep off, or be summoned before the magistrates. Nothing personal in this; it is the usual thing in the older generation.

'Maybe if I'd a-done as other volks all me days, I'd a-be in me own place to-day,' said old Woolacott, never moving.

The dominant spirit of the village had turned him out of the cottage in Lower Ham; Old Woolacott whose seventy years of plain work in the fields – he was earning eleven shillings a week just before the Great War – had not enabled him to save enough money to buy the home where he had lived so long. At the auction he heard, with fear and unhappiness, the bidding rising quickly to his fifty odd pounds saved during more than half a

century, heard it pass on into the sixties, and fall to the mason-builder, whom the village knew would have it, for ninety pounds. Had not this grey-haired man with the uneasy eyes and slinking walk, one of a family whose roots were already spread under many walls, been seen scores of times to stop before the cottage, and cast his eyes over its roof and then down to the garden, peering about. Fifteen year old, that thatch; his father, hale and active at seventy-five, remembered everything about all the village property. Father might be bidding for it too, but for the age of the thatch; he was not one for new building, preferring to keep his money on deposit, where it had always been. Even then, father would not have bid seriously against son, although the appearance of brisk rivalry at the start was to give the idea that here was serious opposition that would run up the price too much for others.

So Old Woolacott moved out of the cottage, for although the new landlord's application for ejection before the magistrates failed, the constant thought of his insecurity wore away all peace of mind. The father of the new owner offered him one of his cottages on Stony Hill, at a lower rent, for father and son had seen something in the local paper about the subsidy for new houses being lowered shortly; and two loads of a handbarrow shifted Old Woolacott's belongings over the couple of hundred yards of rising ground.

On warm days, muffled and coated and clumping carefully on wooden-soled boots and stick, old Woolacott used to go down to watch the breaking-abroad of his old home, and the building of a new tall subsidy house, while his thoughts moved behind shapeless lips, and remained wordless. He had heard that this new house was mostly built of odds and ends picked up here and there, sometimes at night; for, like the industrious rat that drags many times its own weight of food to its hole, the mason-builder was always on the look-out for more property.

Although the cottage on Stony Hill was as comfortable and dark as the one he had quitted, Old Woolacott did not find the ease he had hoped for. As every quarter-day of the four years drew nigh he became concerned and agitated for the security of his time, labour, and vegetables – his property. Another root, but stagnant, of the family he feared lived next door, and whenever Old Woolacott saw the grandfather walking up Stony Hill, he swallowed the spittle in his mouth, and his thoughts began to shape words. When the landlord had taken his pound rent in small silver, and given him a receipt in pencil, that made the middle of his lips slightly purple by wetting the point, and departed, Old Woolacott used to speak quite genially to his neighbours – to the wife and family of another son of his landlord, who spent thirty shillings a week on beer, and had built no houses –

the stagnant root. Should the ball of the youngest child happen to fall in his garden, and be retrieved without permission, Old Woolacott would not sulk for a week, as before quarter-day, but merely tell the little nervous grinning girl that she had no right in his garden.

Thus three years passed, and every quarter-day, when he had paid the rent, and received no three-months' notice to quit, Old Woolacott used to stand in the doorway, or look out of the window if the weather were weest, thinking of his garden in front. With six months clear from Lady Day, it would be safe to put out first early tetties (potatoes) on April the first, and plant kidney beans on Kidney Bean Day (May 1); and after Midsummer, it would be safe to plant out winter greens; after Michaelmas, the digging-up of the garden, and the winter sowing of broad beans; and then after Christmas, he would think it safe to buy half a load of dung, when it was cheap, and rat (rot) it down in the corner with the slops and the cabbage stalks.

The eldest son of the stagnant root was a mason like his father, and earning 1s. 5½d. an hour at his work; but the young man never went into a pub. Old Woolacott used to watch him every fine Sunday, when he came home from the village where he worked and lodged, bringing his girl on the back of his motor-cycle. He was a quiet and steady young man, taking after his mother and sisters. His grandfather had declaimed against

pubs; his father had spent most of his evening leisure in them; he never went in them, but did not declaim; what would the great-grandson do? I heard someone in the village ask this question when the village learned that the young man was going to get married as soon as he had saved enough money to buy from his grandfather the cottage where Old Woolacott dwelt.

Someone – Charlie Tucker, a builder – told Old Woolacott about the proposed sale of the cottage. Charlie Tucker sincerely sympathized with Old Woolacott, saying what a shame it was: that family owned too much already: Old Woolacott heard the news a week before the fourth-year Michaelmas quarter. His landlord said nothing about it on quarter-day; but on the first Sunday in October, a day of warm still air and deep blue sky, the grandson, after leaning his motor-cycle against the wall, and speaking to his girl, went up to him with a smile, and told him that he was hoping to buy the cottage after Christmas, and live in it next summer, when he was wed. He said he had told Old Woolacott then, to give him plenty of time to look around for a new place.

Later the same afternoon Charlie Tucker went to see Old Woolacott, to assert that this was not proper notice, nor was it given at the proper time. This neighbour, unsuccessful bidder for the pulled-down cottage, advised Old Woolacott to take no notice of it.

Christmas came, and the grandson, now the owner, took the rent, but said nothing about notice. In the dry windy days of March, the ground being in temper, men started to dig up their gardens in the evenings after work, but the garden of Old Woolacott was left wild. And a week before Lady Day, saying nothing to his landlord about the cottage his son-in-law had taken for him, Old Woolacott made arrangements with a carter to take him to the village of Morte.

'It be a shame vor to turn out old volks like us be, baint it?' he said to me, when I went to say good-bye to him.

The small head, with its eyes shrunken like a slow-worm's after winter sleep, was unsteady on the neck enwrapped with the double folds of a muffler. The lips continued to sip at nothing. His skinny body under the heavy coat remained fixed and unmoving on the wooden tripod supporting it – wooden soles to boots, besides being cheaper, kept out the damp. Other words were shaping themselves, and a few moments later he said, ''Tis a pity they cauliflowers wasn't let bide vor to come to full head, bain't it?'

Old Woolacott had eaten the cauliflowers when they were small, not wanting to leave any behind when he had gone. Weeds covered the ground strewn with white china shards between the stalks, leaning and stripped, of sprouts and kale. There grew speedwell with its tiny flowers of blue;

shepherd's purse and scurvey grass, both white in bloom; ground-ivy showing purple; and yellow disks of dandelion. Looking at these weeds, Old Woolacott said, with long pauses while his lips faltered, 'There be a garden to the place to Morte, where I be goin', but there'll be a passel-ol'-mores (parcel of old mores, or roots) to skin off 'fore I can till out my tetties. Volks won't skin'n if they'm leaving, wull'n? Yet tidden right vor lave (leave) ground vull of dirty weeds, be ut? 'Tis a lot of work vor an old man to do, bain't it? Tidden like as though I be gwin at Christmas quarter, be ut? 'Tis time the pays (peas) was in. But I be gwin on me own choice. Tidden as though I got vor to go, be ut? No one gimme notice vor to go, as some be zaying.'

The face of the young owner, over the stone wall between the drangs, held a mild grin behind the fag he was smoking. Bliddy ould vule (fool), he was thinking. He felt happy and secure, owning a house and a motor-bike, and well suited with the maid he was to marry in July. He had the pots of paint and the rolls of wallpaper for the doing-on-up already paid for; a table, a pair-of-chest-of-drawers (always so-called in the village), chairs, and a sofa, boughten at auctions; a new shovel and a garden fork with white handles. Granfer said he ought to sue old Woolacott for the quarter's rent, because he hadn't given a quarter's notice of leaving; but let it bide.

All the young man cared about was the moment when Old Woolacott's cart would rattle off down Stony Hill, when he might go into his own house, and kiss his girl with joy as they looked at the ceilings, the floors, the shelves of their very own cottage, and think of all the happiness before them.

THE SAWYERS

The Church Council had decided that the churchyard elms were dangerous, and must be topped. There were fifteen trees, the largest four feet thick at the base, and for more than three centuries their roots had been pushing into the darkness of graves. Nine stood at the western end of the churchyard, shutting out the beams of the morning sun from my cottage and garden immediately under them. Rooks had nested in their tops since the childhood of 'Uncle Joe,' my next-but-one neighbour, an old white-bearded and pensioned railway porter who lived alone.

One morning in March three sawyers came to do the job. They began while I was frying breakfast bacon in my cottage. Afterwards I took out my chair, set it on the path of cinders dividing my garden from my neighbour 'Revvy's', and watched them at work. It was the first warm day of the New Year. Tiny leaves of nettles were growing out of the cracks of the low stone-and-earth wall, where snails were gummed still in sleep. The sky was a pale blue, and hurt the eye when looking up. Above my head came the sound of steady sawing.

A man, looking small, stood in a fork, just under the black nests. Below, in the road, two young men were waiting at the end of a fifty-foot rope tied to the branch being sawn. The sexton joined them. Steadily the sound of sawing came down. The rooks were away somewhere.

On the chimney tun of Hole farmhouse over the road a starling was throwing its head from side to side and clapping its wings as it sang. The song was a wheezy rattling and cluttering of other birds' notes and cries; the mew of a buzzard – the wistful call of a kestrel – the upward scraping cry, ending in a liquid trill, of the flighting curlew. Often in the past I had watched the rooks look up when the starling threw out the kestrel cry; they had never seemed to realize where it came from. They drove kestrels away from the rookery whenever the little brown-winged hawks glided over. Every morning for a week the bird had been singing on the square smoke-blackened stone chimney beside the dead ivy, but this morning its song was continuously audible, for no cawing overlaid it.

The starling flew away when the saw clattered through branches to the earth. The branch was sawn through about three-quarters, and the pulling on the rope would bring it to the ground, clear of my garden wall, it was hoped. Two of the trees had been topped already, and their blunt trunks and shortened limbs were black against the sky and the other doomed row at the top end of the

churchyard. My neighbour Revvy had already gathered a store of sticks for fuel – even the heaviest branches are called sticks – and had stored them in his empty pig's-house, and gone to his work.

The gilt weathercock swung to the east in the flowing wind, shining on the grey stone tower. Bees went past in the sunlit air, a cock crowed in the farmyard over the road, chaffinches were singing – I counted seven. The spaniel slept stretched on his side, pressing down the green leaves of a dock. The sharp chirp of a sparrow came from the thatch of my cottage, which was loose and rotten, and covered with green-greyish lichens. Rain dripping from the trees had rotted it before its 'allotted span' of a score of years.

On the rungs of the tall ladder the boots of the descending man rapped dully and musically. Sawyers and sexton seized the rope and tugged, the branch swayed and creaked; the two rooks' nests clawed the sky. Down it swayed, up it swayed, down it swayed; it grunted for nearly a minute, then *crack!* a shout, a hissing of twigs rushing through the air and the thud of the half-ton sappy bough on the grass and the celandines. The gravestones directly under the inner branches of the trees, and a solitary jam-jar on the weed-grown mound of a suicide in the unconsecrated ground at the edge, were already removed by the sexton. A shower of dry twigs and lichens floated and trickled through

branches to the ground. I could hear the voices of children, released for the eleven o'clock 'break,' loud and shrill in the playground at the western end of the village.

A young man with an axe lopped off the lesser branches. With one swinging blow he cut through a six-inch limb. He was an Exmoor man, heavy, red-faced, with big hands. He was dressed in corduroys, without a collar, but his shirt was fastened with a stud. He would have felt untidy without a stud.

The stick, bounding off a lower branch, had fallen wide and broken a gravestone. The top-sawyer took from his coat a cloth folded around a small mason's trowel, and a tin box of cement. Water was taken from the jam-jar, sullied and smeared by snails, leaning in the long couch grass – once it had held flowers, but long ago they had withered and been forgotten. I have a memory of the poor old fellow tramping in his heavy khaki uniform one summer's day, returning from leave, with his bundle – he was in the Labour Corps, salvaging on the Somme battlefields. He had killed himself, and had been laid there, without a parson's blessing. I think, when my turn comes, I would like to be laid beside him.

The broken top of the stone, with its cracked angel, was stuck on again, while the sexton, who was also the postman, scratched his red nervous head and stammered that Mr. —— would not like

to hear of it. Mr. —— was the churchwarden, an elderly benevolent gentleman, who organised some of the children to tidy the graves and issued small shears to them, so that the grass might always be short, and the weeds and wild flowers discouraged. 'He won't like to zee it, he won't like to zee it,' he kept repeating.

'Who be'n?' asked the top-sawyer.

'Proper gennulman, Mr. ——. Wonnerful lot o' money he's got, Mr. ——. Wonnerful lot o' money. Proper gennulman.'

'Well, then, let'n pay for a new stone.'

A young girl of fifteen came into the churchyard while they were setting the stone. She was awaiting work as servant in one of the new boarding-houses being built in the lower village by the sea. Her name was Marty Gammon, and the cottage women said she was 'one for the men.' She had been maturely conscious of men for perhaps three years. The sawyer who had cut the bough aloft, a short, quick, dark man, with powerful biceps and thighs, began to cheek her at once. He wanted some cement, he said, and knowing that her father was a mason, he suggested she should bring some with her after dinner and meet him at two o'clock up the lane.

This man, whose name was Robert Chugg, preached on Sunday afternoons at various chapels. One evening, just before the Fair, I had passed him at dusk near a roadside barn, with a pot of paste

and a roll of papers. He was affixing to the stone wall a poster on which was printed, in large brown letters:

THE HARVEST IS OVER
SUMMER IS GONE
AND WE ARE NOT SAVED.

Robert Chugg was a married man, thirty-five years old, and the father of several children. Perhaps his nature found an outlet in preaching.

The other men, younger than Chugg, stopped working while he cheeked Marty, and grinned at each other. They were warm from labour and enlivened by their thoughts. Chugg, who was not so tall as Marty, stared at her while he asked her questions; he stared not exactly with a leer, but he used his eyes to say boldly what his words played around. Marty would say neither 'Yes' nor 'No' to his request for cement.

Marty Gammon was dark, strong, and graceful, with hair cut after the fashion of women in towns. She had red lips and merry brown eyes and was chewing a toffee. With a smile that showed her white and regular teeth she held out a paper bag.

'Who wants a sweet?' She gave all the men a toffee, and laughed at the small hatchet with which I was hacking off lesser branches of the stick.

The Exmoor youth was enjoying himself hugely, staring at Marty, but saying nothing, for he had nothing to say. He admired and envied the fluency of Chugg. He grinned at the notches in

my hatchet – he called them natches, changing the vowel, so usual in West Country speech. His own axe-head, bigger than my hand, was sharp as a knife. In a pocket of his waistcoat he carried a slip of stone, and every fifty strokes or so the edge was rubbed with it. His dog, lying in the road and waiting for interesting smells, had a greyish scar in the pupil of one eye and he said it had been pracked by a brimble. The sun shining in his eyes, shaded by an old earth-red felt hat, was called the zin.

Soon after noon, three little boys from the church-school came through the lych-gate. They lived in the village down the valley and did not go home for dinner. They ate bread-and-jam and cake, playing with the spaniel and feeding him. The youngest spoke to the dog in a soft sweet voice,

'Dear doggie, dear Billy doggie, O Billy, take cake from me, Billy dear,' while the scrounging dog wagged his tail-stump and made friends with them, rolling on the warm turf with the children, always wagging a curly stump and looking from food to face, from face to food.

A flight of herring gulls passed over, white birds in the pale-blue sky, slowly moving their anchor-shaped wings, which were tipped with black. They swung over the trees, and, lying on my back, it seemed as though the sky were a pool with a chalk bed, and the gulls were elbowing their slow and placid way through it, on narrow wings edged

with shining where the sunlight touched them. Their cries, to human ears, sounded hard and derisive. After them came the rooks, silently wheeling high over the trees. It was before the time of egg-laying. When they had flown away an old man shuffled along the drang, as the sett-stoned way between cottage and garden wall is called, and stared up at the nests and said, in a slow voice,

'So you be goin' to cut down they craw's nesties.'

The burly young Exmoor man answered him:

'Aiy, granfer. You won't be plagued by they no longer.'

'Wull, I reckon they be turrible destructive things, they craws.'

Pause.

'Aiy.'

Pause.

'I've just been looking at my zeedling tetties. Wonnerful weather for tilling tetties.'

Pause.

'Aiy.'

Pause and spit.

'Aiy, wonnerful weather.'

He repeated his thoughts about the weather and his seedling potatoes, but the lopper of sticks was too busy to listen. I listened, and wrote in my notebook.

It was lovely in the sunlight. All troubles are disentangled from the spirit in the warm sunny

air. Children were playing near me, climbing the sticks, and pretending to be monkeys. The young sister of Marty was among them, a child about five years old, with the same red lips and dark eyes; but the eyes were lit by a gentler inner light. They called her Daisy, and her smaller brother, a round-headed child with eyes that always looked a little startled, was saying to her in a hoarse voice,

'Biell woan't titch 'ee, wull 'er? Thiccy spannul woant 'urt 'ee, wull 'er?'

'Don't be frightened, Boykins,' I assured the three-year-old. 'Bill's a good dog, and won't bite anyone.'

Boykins stretched out a stiff arm and hurriedly drew the tips of fingers down the spaniel's head, muttering hoarsely, 'Nao, Biell's a gude dog. Er woant titch 'ee, wull 'er? Nao, Biell woant hurt 'ee, wull er?'

Dog yawned, and Boykins hurried behind a tombstone.

Goldfinches fluttered among the graves, piping to each other. Soon, O, soon, the apple-blossom!

Children began to gather twigs for firing; but the sexton hurried them away lest they be injured by falling boughs. The great limbs were sappy, with brown centres in the cross-cut sections. Some had black circles around the brown, for they were decaying. I longed to swing the long-handled axe, to feel the glinting head cut deep into the live

wood, to swing again and send the cracked chip flying.

One heavy bough, growing over the road, had to be roped to a higher bough before it was sawn, for if it fell straight it would crush the front of a cottage. Like a two-legged spider the top-sawyer ran about the tree, sliding down the rope when made fast above, and whipping the saw from its sling, commenced to cut through the lower end of the limb, which was eighteen inches thick. He stood in the fork, forty feet from the ground, not holding, but leaning at an angle of forty-five degrees against the roped branch he was sawing. When he had cut through two-thirds of the branch he began to climb down to the top of the ladder fifteen feet below. Suddenly the branch creaked and cracked and plunged down hissing, to be held by the rope, and to crash against the trunk where he was holding. It hit the trunk two seconds after it had creaked; but in that time the sawyer had run like a spider round the other side of the tree, using his hands only and holding to thin, bristle-like twigs. He laughed gleefully, looking down at the horrified face of Marty below, her hand to her mouth. He would laugh like that when he met her in the lane at two o'clock; whatever she said or did he would laugh.

A blue-grey gossamer floated past me, cast into the warm breeze by a woken spider. It gleamed red and blue as it drifted, as though from the sun.

One o'clock struck in the tower. The sawyers went to their dinners in the sexton's cottage, where they were lodging. The old tiller of potatoes, a widower, whom no one visits, placed against the hasp of his lower window an earth-stained postcard. On it was written: *Up in me garden.* The brown faded ink of the lettering was very old, and the card was spotted with innumerable tiny freckles – black of flies and yellow-white of spiders, all that was left of many summers' window tenants.

The old man's boots scraped on the irregular stones of the drang; they ceased; and after some moments of waiting his stringy voice said,

'Be 'ee there?'

I spoke.

'I wasn't sure,' he said. 'My eyes ba'nt so strong as they were.'

He gazed at me amiably, and pointed a crooked arm and finger in the direction of the lopped elms.

'Us won't be bothered by they craws no more, wull us? Now, ye know, 'tis a funny thing, but I fancy they craws used to take my tetties early mornings. Aiy.'

He lowered his arm and paused.

'Aiy,' he said, slowly and heavily.

A quarter of a minute later: 'Else 'twas they rats.'

He cleared his throat and spat.

'Aiy, p'raps 'twas they rats.'

He reflected, then he said:

'They rats be masterpieces for stealing. Aiy.'

Then looking at me earnestly with his ruined eyes, he said in a low voice:

'Yurr! If 'ee can spare a moment.'

I went to him. He glanced round, and to the other side, and whispered:

'Do 'ee think his Reverence would mind if I were to gather up a few of they broken sticks for me bodley?'

A kitchen range is called a bodley in the hamlet, from the maker's name which appeared on the earliest cast-iron stoves to be mortar'd into the wide open hearths of cottages.

I told Uncle Joe that the Rector had said that anyone could have the wood, which was not worth the cost of hauling to the sawmills. This appeared to amaze him. He said in the same low, confidential voice, after glancing round to see if we were quite alone,

'They do say that they chaps be getting a pound a day for cutting they trees. 'Tis a turrible lot o' money, don't 'ee think?'

I told him that the contractors were to be paid thirty pounds for the job, which would take three days.

'Three days, did 'ee say? Well, I never!'

When he had worked out three times three, making it nine, and subtracted nine from thirty, he told me that twenty-one pounds was left for they contractor chaps. Aiy. 'Twas remarkable what some folks did get, when you came to think about it. Aiy.

Meanwhile, I helped Uncle Joe to gather sticks. With thickened fingers he pulled at a rook's nest, muttering that it would 'yett proper,' that is, heat proper, meaning the bodley.

It was no easy task to remove the nests from the branches. Now I knew why they had stayed in the treetops during the south-west gales of winter. They were fixed in the supporting branches like the crooked fingers of a hand upheld, and the birds cleaning their beaks on the branches had cut the bark, causing them to swell, to become knotty, to grow distorted, and so to clutch the sticks.

Uncle Joe took the nests to his backhouse, once the dark, damp abode of successive pigs, where he kept coal, garden tools, and all sorts of old rummage – parings of horse-hoofs, rope, string, odd nails and screws rusted and useless, ancient boots and broken pails and books, and on the wall three tattered corsets; and in shallow boxes on the worm-eaten beams above, his beloved 'zeedling tetties.' To-morrow would be Friday, and he would draw his Old Age Pension at the post-office, and while he was away the post-card would be in his window, showing the reverse side, not so fly-marked:

Gone up to Shop.

Friday was the most eventful day of the week for him, and in the afternoon he would stand in the doorway, smoking and waiting, quiet and happy, for the butcher's van to bring his weekly piece of beef.

'Aiy, they craws' nesties wull burn fine,' he called as he scraped back to his cottage, where before eating he would wash his hands in the water that had lain for more than a week in his only enamel bowl. Some thought him a dirty old man, but the well where he dipped his pitcher was more than a hundred steps away from his threshold – past Revvy's cottage, then mine, then round past the backhouses – and the bending of rheumaticy knees and back and neck was very painful.

It was quiet again in the sunshine. The song-birds were resting; men to their dinners. A solitary rook flew over the broken trees, with moss in its beak. It wheeled, cawing its misery to the empty sky, and flew away.

1922

THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING

I.

IN THE VILLAGE

Hot sunlight flooding the red lane below my garden wall had made the inch-high nettles a deeper green since the morning, and warmed the stones and mortar chinks between them. For days the lane had been cold and wet, the sky over the village a ragged grey, travelling ever north-east. This morning gleams showed in the Atlantic clouds, and soon a golden tide was pouring over the hills; grass, hens and pigs in the glebe field, tiles of barns, lichens and leaves of pennywort on the walls and chimney tuns, budding daffodils in the gardens and orchards, all were luminous with hope. And into the bright heat by my garden wall a little numb creature came, sliding on its coils out of the crack where it had lain all the winter. It took the heat of the March sun, which laid a glisten on its skin, and drew from it the torpor of cold earth. It felt joy along its length, and moved, but grew tired; and lay like a grey S in the grooved wheel-track of the lane.

As I set out for the headland, drawn by the sudden rush of the sun, my shoe nearly crushed

the snake-like innocent lying there. I picked it up between finger and thumb – a slow-worm, called longcripple's mate by country people. A longcripple is a viper, whose hollow fangs hold poison. The name longcripple's mate is certainly ironic, although bestowed in ignorance, for the slow-worm is without venom, bringing death only to flies, which it lances with a little black forked tongue. Its only connexion with longcripple is that sometimes the viper eats it.

The slow-worm writhed slowly between the skin of my thumb and finger, its tiny eyes, shrunken and sleepy, holding the remote fear of death. As I walked with it to my cottage, to show my two-year-old son, a woman appeared from behind Billy Goldsworthy's barn, and seeing me, gave a concerned cry. She held in both hands a tangle of bright green leaves, which she was about to cast on the heap under the wall of the barn.

'Nasty stuff, this shamrock,' she said. 'It gets under the walls, and makes the whole house damp. Oh, what is that you've got there? A snake? Yes, as I was saying; this shamrock grows everywhere, there's no stopping it when it starts. All over the stones of our path, it used to spread, until Will had concrete laid down. Will hates it. Oh, how can you hold that dreadful thing like that? Horrid, it looks. What is it, a snake? Isn't it dangerous? I wonder you are not afraid to handle it. I wouldn't hold it if I were you.

What do you think about this new Revised Prayer Book?'

She was an elderly London woman, a little different from the rest of the village. Tom Gammon's proud description of one of his daughters can be applied to her, within the local meaning of the phrase – 'a grammatical speaker.' After working some years as a dressmaker in the neighbouring village of Cryde, she had married William Carter, a club-footed dairy farmer with a variety of names – Farmer Bill, Rumbling Willy, Cousin Billy, Thunderbolt – this last being a derivative of Vanderbilt, owing to his supposed wealth. He lived in the cottage behind the barn with his wife and his sister, a tall, pale, thin woman, who seldom went more than a dozen yards from her iron garden gate, except on Sundays when going to church. Their cottage adjoined that of Revvy Carter, who was their cousin, another William Carter. Cousin Billy and his grammatical-speaking wife, and the spinster sister, did not approve of the untidy ways of their poor relations, who let the shamrock grow, with its vivid yellow flowers opening only in the sunlight. Shamrock and relations had received many glances of displeasure during the years I had been neighbours with them all.

'Will! Will! Do come and see what Mr. Williamson has got,' cried out Mrs. Thunderbolt, as heavy slow boot-falls sounded on the concrete path behind the angle of the barn. 'Come along, Will!

Isn't the sun nice? My cold is so much better. Have you had the influenza? We've all had it. Will was so strange, we knew there was something wrong when he wouldn't eat his dinner.' Her voice rose, for her husband had closed the iron gate behind him, and was clumping towards us.

She shouted in his ear, 'Look what Mr. Williamson's found. Nasty I call it. Don't you, Will?'

'Hey?' cried her husband, hand to ear, out of which grew long reddish hairs.

'A snake, Will!'

'Oo! Ah!' ejaculated the retired nine-acre farmer. 'Fancy that, now. 'Tis one of they longcripple's mates, surenuff.'

'Are you sure it won't hurt you, Will? Don't get too near it. One can't be too careful with strange things, that's what I always say. Ugh!'

I explained to her that it was not a snake, but a lizard, and entirely harmless.

'Mr. Williamson thinks it won't hurt you. What do you think, Will? Isn't it probably poisonous?'

'Hey?'

'I said, it might be probably poisonous.'

'Aw, no, it won't rain, I vancy.'

'Will's hard of hearing. A pity, isn't it! Is it pois-onous? Poison-ous?'

'Oo, I can't say for sure,' mumbled Farmer Bill. ''Tis a znake of sorts, surenuff. I've seen scores of'n up to Booayes – scores.'

'I don't like the look of it. I was saying before you came that it had better be killed.'

She was a childless woman. On her big head was a bigger hat, consisting of various bits of cloth and fabric sewn around a bought wire frame. It was meant for decoration, and she had got pleasure from using up odd bits so neatly. It was a hat conceived and made behind closed windows, with the curtains drawn to shut out the sun.

'I wonder if it thinks we had better be killed,' I asked. 'I don't suppose it likes the looks of us.'

'I meant that it looked dangerous,' she explained.

'It isn't dangerous,' I said. 'And it is an outrage under heaven that I should be holding it tight between my finger and thumb. All the time it is writhing and straining to escape. It is in agony. Its tail might drop off with fright, and so I am going to put it in the sun by the barn, away from the wheels in the road.'

She gave me one of her quick sidelong glances. Four years previously, I had heard her saying to her sister-in-law Bessie, whose voice in the cool dark dairy – spotlessly clean with its lime-ash floor and cloam scalding pans on the bodley, seen through the wicket window where Bessie's thin arm used to pass the milk-jugs – often used to arise in shrill condemnation of her, 'Doesn't he say peculiar things. Some say he isn't all there – a little mazed. Firing off guns in the middle of the night, and having dogs sleeping

in the same room with him. Crawling about at all hours after those dirty owls in the roof; I wish the landlord would stop up the hole under the thatch, I can't sleep at night for the noise they make. I wish they would fly in his windows one night, they're open winter and summer, just the same in all weathers. He never goes to church either, and they say he doesn't believe in it; and he talks about the Germans as though they had never behaved like they did all through the war. And we might all be burnt up in our beds one night, there's no telling. Hullo, Mr. Williamson, have you come for your milk? I was just telling Bessie here about your burning those old motor tyres and that mattress in your garden last night. Will woke up and thought the thatch was on fire. He was ever so scared.'

It was the same tale whenever I made a fire of weeds or manuscripts in the garden. I had never heeded her much; for me she was a symbol of old Europea.

To-day I was impatient to be off on my walk, to see the tide heaving and ripping over the reef called Bag Leap, and how far built was the raven's nest, and if the peregrine falcons were over their eyrie, and if— 'Now this little putty snake will be out of danger here,' I said, 'and now I'm going round the headland.'

'Oh!' she said, 'are you going all that way in this cold wind? Well, I suppose you must like going, or

you wouldn't be going, would you? I can't say that I would like to be going with you. What do you think, Will?'

'Hey?' boomed Thunderbolt.

'Mr. Williamson says he's going round the headland, in all this cold wind. I was just saying that I wouldn't care to be going where he's going. Nor would you, either, eh?'

'Aw, don't 'ee till tetties yet!' he replied, shaking his head. 'Aw no, the ground ban't in temper – it's no use mucketting.'

'Poor Will, he gets deafer and deafer,' explained his wife. 'Although sometimes he pretends he can't hear when he can. He's had his ears syringed out, too, but it was a waste of money. What a blessing it is to have all one's faculties, isn't it? I should kill that snake if I were you. With so many children about, there might be an accident. What a pretty little boy your's is, isn't he? Just fancy now if that snake bit him? You'd never forgive yourself, would you? You can't be too careful, you know.'

The slow-worm, feeling the sun, moved slightly on the warm earthenware shard under the wall of the barn.

'Dad,' cried a voice, as I walked back to the cottage. 'Dad, will 'ee, will 'ee come back to have tea with me to-day?'

'I'll be back in three hours' time,' I promised my two-year-old son; and the wind rushed against my face.

THE LANE TO THE SEA

There was more air and light outside the village, from which I strode with head clearing of indoor contacts. Past the three cottages of Rock Park, whose garden walls bristled with old snapt stalks of red valerian – called 'drunkards' in the village – among which new green leaves were showing; past the Church School, now shut because of the influenza epidemic, with its tiny windows; past the worn steps leading in to the bare playground; past the schoolmaster's house adjoining, and the old square garden once tilled by the children – but now sold by the owner, a wealthy childless farmer, for a bungalow site.

By the new square bungalow, with its asbestos roof, the banks rose above the lane. Brambles hung out of the thorns a-top them, stripped and made ragged by the shoulders of passing carters. There was a gateway just beyond the bungalow, opening on a wide green pasture called Netherhams, sloping gently to the blue northern sky – a fine field for mushrooms every third or fourth summer. Its lane frontage was for sale as sites for bungalows, at many times the price paid for the land five years before.

The ruddle pools were shrinking in the lane; already the rutted mud was plastic, taking a fine clean print of my nailed shoes. By the wayside such large celandines were facing the sun! One, a

veritable Sirius, was two inches wide, with thirteen petals. A hemisphere of starry petals was shining there; constellation after constellation had broken into light since the morning, for yesterday, when I passed here in the rain, I saw only the shovel-shaped leaves. The flower leaps out of the plant, the essence of its being; for days and weeks and months it prepares for the fullest moments of its existence, the risen beauty of its flowers. Ecstasy shines in the yellow-glistered celandines, sudden and lusty as the March sunlight.

The lane began to sink deeper between the fields; a ragged shadow of the hedge-top divided it. Where the wheels of carts and motor-cars had worn the red iron-stone metalling the shale bedrock showed grey, smoothed by the runners of sleds in use along this way before the coming of the wheel. Shale is soft and easily worn; when used for building, it slowly crumbles into dust. Lichens eat it at their ease. The iron-stone beds lay a few hundred yards to the north; the rock for the road metalling was carted from the quarry half-way up the hill to Ox's Cross, and tipped out in the bays cut in the hedge banks. There the stone-crackers, wearing gauze spectacles and sitting on the ground, tapped with their blunt double-headed hammers until the rugged piles were graded into neat rectangular heaps, when their faces, clothes, and hands would be stained a browny red by the dust and the sweat.

Half a mile from the village I passed one such bay, where the lane, which had been rising gently and steadily, flattened on the ridge before descending again. Brambles leant over the red heap of stones, seeking to put down roots between them, and find a hold in the earth. Always the overhanging feelers had been stripped or broken when the horse-butts had come to the stone dump, yet the sun in the sky ever renewed their blossom-thoughts, and the long brambles crept forth again. Their claims are ceaseless, and if Man were to leave this lane, the brambles would very soon hide it with their entanglements.

WIND, GRASS, AND SUN

Between the hedges I could see the Atlantic, white upflung bursts of waves, a mile away and below. Above my left shoulder the bare grey ash saplings of the hedge, with their dark brown cloven buds, rattled and swished in the south-west wind, which was blowing half a gale. Gulls drifted overhead, rocking and crooking their wings. The fields of plough and pasture, the trees and thatched roofs of the farm buildings below, the flock of yellowhammers alighting and flitting along the ruddy twigs of dogwood and the young leaves of honeysuckle, the plants of foxglove, the lichens on the stone – all took light from the sky, and freed the thought-cumbered spirit. Air and sun and wind,

these are the inspiration of life, the ancient source of renewal, whose inherited essence is the beauty in Man's mind. A lark was singing, and another lark, many larks: and it seemed to me, in the beauty of that moment, that the inspiration of walls and pavements was false, bringing upon men the things of darkness.

The wind and the sun vibrate the tissues charged and impressed in ancient days: I am one with the sunlight, and the lark is my brother. These feet must not break the flapping arrow-shaped leaves of the wild arum, as I clamber over a dog-gap in the hedge to the open fields, for its hopes are my hopes under the wide sky.

The wind smote me, filling my sleeves and hollowing my coat, pulling out my tie and flacking it on my cheek. Its fragile roar rushed against my ears. The grass was not yet tall enough to be flattened and dispread, the old tussocks were sodden, hard-cored, and unresponsive; soon the green of the new blades would be pushing through. In June this field would be a haunt of meadow pipits, fluttering from their nests in the tussocks when my feet were one stride distant: poor little things, feigning a broken wing, in anguish, but not for themselves. Then the thistles would hold the field, rank upon rank, so that to walk through them would be to make a crooked course like a rabbit along its run. Now the roots were preparing summer's down as they crept underground. The stems, just before

flowering, would be cut with a scythe, for they were 'noxious weeds,' and condemned by law, which also condemned the yellow ragwort, with its wind-borne seeds, and the dock; but the stems would arise again, and in August the sun-dried cardoons would break, and free their glistening aery wheels into the warm air, as in every year I have known them float away.

So many times have I crossed the field, climbing through the gap worn by the feet of every dog that passes, that I could draw from memory almost all the rabbit runs which, numerous as the boughs and branches of an oak tree, were trodden everywhere through the grass. Every year from September to March iron gins were tilled in some of the banks, and many of the rabbits used to lie out in the open, squatting in layers, or sheltered places in the tussocks. Then the trapper brought his wires of twisted brass, made into nooses with slip-knots, and fastened to wooden pegs. The pegs were driven in beside the runs, a hazel twig with a cleft top holding the noose as high as the head of a rabbit travelling to its feeding ground; and the rest was not silence, but screams that were throttled, and a dance that wore the grass away, with periods of rest and the agony of half-breathing until . . . but I will forget sadness, for this is the first day of Spring.

THE BROOK

The lower part of the field sloped into the coombe bottom, and a bank had to be climbed before the brook was reached. This bank was guarded by a single strand of barbed wire, stretched between short posts, parallel with the ground, to keep cattle from breaking the hedge. There was a magpie in the next field; the wind had prevented it from hearing my footfalls. It had not seen my head appearing, and while crouching on the bank I was able to watch its work of opening the skull of a dead rat. Probably the rat had been caught in a gin the evening before, discovered this morning when the trapper went down the hedge, knocked on the head, and flung a couple of yards from the bank.

Blow after blow of its beak the magpie, standing on the rat's shoulders, delivered between the ear and the eye socket. Six daps it gave, then looked around, before bending its neck and striking again with all its strength. The wind lifted the small black feathers of its back, which gleamed with green and purple.

The magpie hammered the skull about a dozen times and made two rapid surveys, in about eight seconds. When it raised its head for the third survey, it saw me, gave a short sharp cry, and flew away. I jumped down, and turning the rat over with my

stick, noticed that both its eyes had been picked out. Magpies, with the relative crows and daws, have the eyes first, probably because they are the easiest to take.

I ran down to the brook, for a leap across the turf of its low banks broken and holed by bullocks. The stream at this place is normally eighteen inches wide, flowing clear and fast, but the marshy ground is eight feet in width. Trout live in the water, the biggest about eight inches long. A heron comes regularly to stalk them. Furze was in bloom on the bank just above the cattle drinking-place, and kneeling down, with my face near the reflected sky, I found the first water-cress of the year.

It grew among the multitudinous leaves of another water plant, which is poisonous, but whose name I do not know. A common plant, but I have never sought for it in my Sowerby – a beautiful book, with illustrations faithfully coloured by hand; a book dearer to me because Richard Jefferies could never afford to buy it. Easy to pluck a leaf and take it home and lay it beside its likeness in Sowerby; but no. In how many other waters have I seen it since the first leaf was plucked in the brook we used to dam with turves in a far-off country, where once a voice (very young still) cried anxiously, 'P'ay don't eat it? P'ay don't eat it! Very pois'nous, nasty dirty plant!' as I pretended to munch the leaves, secretly pleased at the show of care for me. Ten years ago, this very month, I saw

it in the waters of the Ancre, flowing cold and swift on its chalk bed under Beaumont Hamel; and a ghost, not long of the thin air, rose up beside me among the charred poplar stumps of the dreadful swamp. The waters of this fair Devon brook move under and over the leaves of the mock water-cress plants: let them be of the far-off country, nameless for ever.

THE CATTLE PATH

Beyond the brook the pointed leaves of the yellow iris had pricked through the grass, and were two inches high; in patches of twisted points, each with its shadow. At the end of the month they would be as tall as a bullock's dew-claw, green and straight; for cattle do not eat them. A good farmer would cut them with a scythe when they were tall in May, to exhaust the knotted bulbous roots which increase by pushing through the ground. The farmer who tills the ground can have few aerial brothers.

By one of the iris patches lay a path, nine inches wide in the grass. It was of beaten earth, rough and dark. Nothing ever grew on it. Morning and afternoon the cows followed along the path, one behind the other, never varying the pace of their slow and swinging walk. The horn of their hooves kept the path trimmed and everywhere exact in width. The path wandered like water, but without the reason of water, which must ever be falling. All

the lanes probably were begun as casually as this cow-path, which would remain there for as long as the leading cow lived in the field, to amble to the open gate, knowing by its almost instinctive sense of time, and also by the weight of its udders, when the milking hours of morning and evening were nigh. One cow is usually the leader, for animals are much more creatures of habit than are men; and the way is regularly trodden in the lives of all the cows which graze together in a field.

The moles were busy mining under the grass, throwing up their heaps at the pit-heads as they cleared the galleries for the hungry hunt every four hours. White splashes on the bank marked where a buzzard had waited while watching for a heap to heave – when it would jump off the bank and grab with its yellow feet. One mole run was made almost the length of the cattle path; a mole will always tunnel under such a track when it finds it. Perhaps the worms on which it feeds find more food there, or, more probably, the absence of grass roots makes easier the work of digging.

I passed through the gateway in the corner of the field, where an elm tree grew almost parallel with the bank which it covered with its branches. Under it the ground was pitted and broken by bullocks sheltering there during the storms which had helped to make the tree's shape. All the trees along the banks of this high open ground grew one-sided, and without much height, for only those

boughs growing north-east, away from the south-westerly gales, had not beaten against one another and broken their bark, lost the leaves by which they breathe, died downwards, become brittle and damp and the holding-place of fungus, and fallen rotten. Most of them must have more roots in the ground than limbs in the air. Lichens grew on the living branches, like little withered trees, like wisps of hair on the heads of corpses bleached by chlorine gas in the Salient. The dry, greyish-green lichens love the rain and the wind, and do not appear to thrive so well in sheltered places out of the salt blasts of winter.

Through another field I followed the cattle path, over ground beginning its steep decline to the wide wet sands and the white heaving waste of the sea below. The wind came direct from the waves; I could lean against it, and with arms outheld imagine the effortless beauty of flight. I glided over the field, tenuous as wind; and out of the grass sprung the blue-rayed flowers of the chicory, and the brilliant hawkbits of summer, and the yellow claws of the bird's-foot trefoil. In that moment the spirit was free in the wind rushing from out the vast spaces of the sky, and unbounded in creation with the sun.

THE ENGBOO

Yet the body cannot fly over the gate by Vention Lane. The gate? – there were two gates: a new gate of ash-wood, with new white concrete posts. It stood six feet back from where the old lichened gate, with its loose rattling top-bar, swung from the engboo of pitch pine, timber from a wreck, with iron trenail pins thin-flaked with rust. An engboo is the post on which the gate hangs, probably a corruption of hang-bough. Hereabouts the engboo is usually either a bit of wrecking, or an old rutted trunk of an apple tree, or an upright slab of shale rock, or a living tree. All the engboos in Vention Lane, and its continuation called Stentaway Lane, are doomed; the wood will vanish with them, and very soon there will be only ferro-concrete posts. A notice board stands by the gate, proclaiming the site of the proposed new motor road to be cut along the side of the downs and to merge into Vention and Stentaway Lanes, which it will devour, hedges, engboos, and all, on its way to Cryde and Town. Here will come the many-coloured motor-coaches from the northern Exmoor coast in summer, above the loveliest bay in the West Country. There will be houses and hotels and many people, and perhaps laws about bathing made by old men with minds deadened by paving stones, who never reveal their bodies to the sun. Those sands, where in 1916 my

friend and I ran naked and shouting into the sea: the days before the Somme, when the illusion of youth still wandered over the sea and the sky.

From the beginning of time, which man invented, this place has been to the soaring hawks and the gulls gliding over from the inland fields, to the fox lying in the furze, the rabbits, the wild partridges, and the stonechats. Here was the solitude of the sea and the sky. In the days when first I saw it the Immortals dwelled in these hills; the still bright noons shimmered with mystery, ships in the Severn Sea were sailing in the sky, the sun setting under the far world's sea-line took the heart into vast and unutterable spaces. That last day of May, 1914, when the boy walked over thirty miles in the hot sun, taking a last look at trees and lanes and cliffs and streams, taking farewell of enchantment, and saying on the lonely headland while the heart ached with all longing, 'Good-bye, I shall return, but it will never be the same.'

The crumbling and brownish-red stump of the old engboo has been heaved out of the earth, and the bank levelled. That corner of the field, now rutted with butt-wheel tracks between the wire road-fences, used to be the home of a colony of teasel plants, with their curious green water-holding leaves, prickly like the teeth of fish. One day, coming down the field, I saw a goldfinch sipping water on a teasel stalk; a lovely sight, with the crimson of its face and the yellow and black of

its wings, beside the bristly head crowning the plant's life, hung with flowers almost the colour of the grey-purple shale rock. Now the engboo is fallen, my teasels will not bloom in that corner again, and soon the wheels of civilisation will be grinding their seeds with the dust; but to-day a little of the rare and precious illusion of boyhood has returned, and the sun is shining for me in heaven.

THE PROBLEM OF PEACE

Opposite the new gateway stood a telegraph pole, rising out of brown loops of old barbed brambles. Under them grew the low leaves of the new year's nettles, each with a minute hole gnawn in its centre. What tiny teeth, or sets of rasps, had been at work there? The small black slug, that lays a glistening track from its home under the damp rotten stalks of the old nettles, and returns before sunrise? The yellow-banded snail, not yet eager after its trance on the underside of a stone in the bank? It could hardly be any new-hatched caterpillars of the red admiral butterflies, which lay their eggs on the nettles, for they are still asleep in the dry chinks of the hollow ash trees of Combas Lane, in the crevices of cob walls, and under the thatched roofs. While I was peering among the nettles for a sight of the leaf-eater, I heard a shout, and looking up the field, I saw a farmer on a horse, two hundred yards away.

The eyes of a dog were also upon me, as his master's mingled protests and insults were roared into the wind. After his rabbits, was I, and breaking down his banks? I was to get out of it quick, or he would pitch me out quicker than I liked. He didn't want no bliddy German on his land. Waving my hand in acknowledgment of this tremendous insult, I jumped down into the lane again, where I squatted under the wind, and considered the problem.

It was the tenth anniversary of the great German attack on the Somme; nearly a decade since the War had ended, but still the effect of what this farmer had read in newspapers, or heard from pulpits, platforms, and inns, lingered as verities in his mind. Like many another young and healthy farmer, during that War he had remained on his farm, tilling his land and making much money from his crops, especially potatoes, and from his cream and butter. Cream at five shillings a pound soon increases a bank-balance and consequent self-estimation. Ten years since the face of Truth was spat upon more than usual – Truth, which has been demonstrated, at least once during our known human history, to be Humanity. Every man has his vision of Truth: what was the vision of that man on the skyline, that farmer with his heavy hands pulling back the mouth of the cob which usually he cantered on the hard surface of the lane, that man whose voice I had heard so often bawling at inoffensive animals? Would anything ever

bring him to see plainly, to unlearn all that he had read and heard until the old world was ended for him . . . the old world which was made of men's thought?

I told myself that his anger was reasonable, for were not many of his gaps unstopped and widened by summer visitors, and new gaps broken in his hedges? Why then all this cogitation ten years after the War, which some said was a natural solution of the problem of surplus population: essentially natural, since men were not born to inherit the earth, but gentlemen.

The telegraph pole went on humming to itself, heedless of my ironic contemplation. Surely it was one of the things a 'healthy-minded man' should laugh at, this German business; but I could not laugh. For me the sunshine lost some of its pleasure: now it was like the Somme sun, which was never like the sun in England. Ah well, perhaps in some other field, in wind that blew under the same sky, a farmer was shouting at another man who walked about and peered at birds, while others had to work hard for a living; and perhaps the farmer was calling him an Englishman. That Englishman in German fields, and this German in an English field, both released parts of grievous and ghastly things – manifestation of innumerable farmer-thoughts, formed out of ideas alien to the human spirit, cohered by virtues suborned and exploited – smile at each other across the land and

the sea, as we smiled at each other in No-man's-land on Christmas Day, in the year of the prophetic farewell to these very trees and lanes and streams and cliffs.

The lark is our brother; the sun shines in beauty again.

THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING

2.

THE ORIGIN OF GHOSTS

Having given the farmer time to depart, as I hoped, I got up and looked over the hedge. There he was, sturdy and statuesque on his horse, beside the new notice board which had been erected when the manor house, with a few fields, had been sold over the unsuspecting head of the old tenant, an artist. The new board, bearing white letters on a black background, with the suggestion of black japanned boxes in lawyers' offices, barred the way to the headland path. It was not a right-of-way, but until recently travellers were allowed to pass over the rough grazing land to the paths along North Side. In the lane, on hot summer days, man is but mortal, enduring dust and glare with the vision of cool, green, hollow waves toppling on head and back; but when he has passed through the gate the world suddenly falls away, and the wind finds him, the everlasting and immortal wind, with its secret gifts of heaven.

Beyond the gate is the green top of the world; far below are the sea and the sands. Your companions are the clouds above the dim far coastline

of Wales. Children shout when they run on the sward after the dusty lane; dogs prance and course in circles, barking with delight, and rolling with ecstasy. The shoulders feel broader, the toes strive to pass through encumbering leather and press into sward.

A branch of the path led down over the fields and the low scrub-grown cliffs to the shore. I remember a stile between the two fields in 1914, and again in 1916, and for some years after the War. Now the stile was altered, and another notice board at the foot of the cliffs confronted the summer walkers from Woolcombe. Only once had I dared to use the lower path as in the old days, and then, where the cliff ended on a muddy rock by a clump of yellow flag irises, I encountered a stare, massive with the sense of property, a stare that enveloped me as I picked my way over the worn footholds, and, in ponderous silence, swung round and followed me some distance towards the sea. It clung to me during my swim: none of my magniloquently ironic retorts could allay it; it is with me still: and if, as some do say, certain vivid human experiences cast off into the air a wraith which is perpetuated in time and space, a ghost one day may be seen on those sands, walking rapidly away from the little beach of grey and purple boulders, bearing on its back the branded words

NO PATH
NORTH SIDE ESTATE

VENTION LANE

The way to the headland being closed, I set off down Vention Lane, meaning to climb the Naps cliffs from the sands. Vention Lane was sunken under banks, and little more than the width of a horse-butt. The naked rock showed worn in the wheel-ruts where the winter rains, rushing down the steep hill, had scoured the stones and earth of its rough surface.

It led down to the old round lime-kiln by the sea-shore, and the two lime-burners' cottages. It is said in the village that the name Vention was derived from those two cottages, which were called the Cottages of the New Invention – since they had been built with chimneys, which were, apparently, the new invention.

Old Muggy told me that, in his 'kid days,' barges were beached on the sands at half-tide in calm weather, and chalk from the French coast carried away in horse-butts up the lane and the grassy sloping track to the rim of the kiln, and tipped on to the firing of 'sticks' below. But tonnage prices rose, lime-burning ceased.

The two cottages stood empty, and brambles explored the round kiln, dropping down their green grappling lines into the shadowy damp hollow. Seeds of ferns and briars, scurvey-grass, pennywort, polypody fern, were blown into the kiln, or dropped

there by birds. In time lichens like molten silver anciently splashed on the stones, and corroded by sea-salts, loosened away the surfaces on which they were spread. Rain unsettled the mortar, and mosses filled the crevices. A pair of wagtails – who love ruins – built in one or another of the spaces made by fallen stones, year after year. Lizards and longcripples stole out of the chinks when the summer sun had made hot the upper stones.

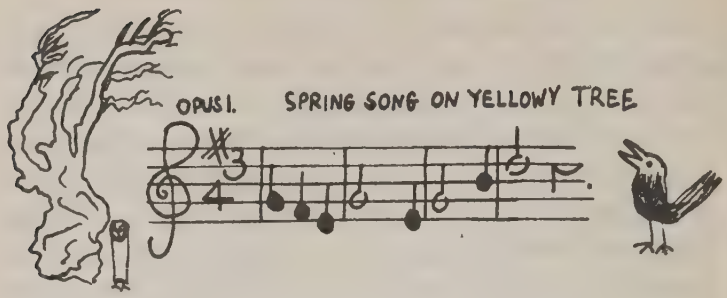
After the War masons came down Vention Lane, and the cottages were made into one building, with a new roof in place of the former slate roof sunken like the hide of a stranded and dead whale. The kiln was covered with corrugated iron sheets, with wooden steps leading up to what, I was informed, was a bathroom. An extra wing, with lean-to roof, was added to the cottage on the kiln side, and a garage erected in the field above, with a threatening notice board. Sometimes in the days of summer, when passing the Cottages of the New Invention on my way to swim, I had a glimpse of a figure in a black tailed coat and stiff shirt-front, sitting in the new wing, polishing tumblers, and keeping discreetly out of the sunlight. Soon afterwards the shadowy figure vanished, with the voices it used to await, and after awhile others came; and near the sward of the kiln, once so bright with hawkbits and bird's-foot trefoil, a grey heap of stuff began to increase and slide down towards the sea – as though it were the roosting place of a

gigantic pterodactyl that had not heard of the extinction of its species. For months I wondered idly what this grey mass might be, visible from the sea at low tide a quarter of a mile away, until one day an old woman gathering sticks told me. 'Oh, 'tis wonnerful what they do be inventing nowadays. If tidden one thing, 'tis another. They say 'tis water on a bit of old stuff like chips of stone doth make a light in ivry room to wance. Oh, 'tis wonnerful what they be inventing nowadays.'

THE BLACKBIRD OF THE BLASTED TREE

As I walked on the wet sand under the Naps, I heard the notes of a blackbird, and looking up the cliffs, I saw my old friend on his usual perch – an elderberry tree which, growing crippled away from the sea winds, put forth a few poor twigs and leaves every spring among the bleached bones of its dead branches. To what age does a blackbird live unless it dies violently? I had known that blackbird six years before; I recognised him every spring by the quality of his notes. He sang more quietly and slowly than most other blackbirds; the song seemed to come from beyond the bird; and at intervals he repeated a refrain which was a perfect cadence. One year I asked a friend to write it down, and he was amazed by its perfection of time and tune.

I remembered that a white wren had appeared in the village some years before, to be shot immedia-



ately, and eventually to be much admired, in a tiny glass case, for its pink feet and eyes, and the perfection of its plumage; and as I walked away I thought it was fortunate we were not musical in the village of Ham.

THE FOREIGNERS

At the bottom of the cliffs was a clitter of great rocks fallen in past ages from the sea-worn edge of the land. Seaweeds and shell-fish grew on the lower rocks, made them slippery, but it was easy to climb and scramble from point to point and so to reach the base of the cliff, where the waves never broke and the grass began. The way up the cliff was steep, but not dangerous. There were many footholds on the embedded pieces of fallen rock, half-hidden by grass and ivy. At the top of the cliff the land broke vertically, and there it was needful to tread warily. The sands beneath, with their pools and watery ribbed hollows, and the jumbled heap of dark, sharp-edged rocks now looked immediately beneath my feet: to miss a hold by

hand or foot would mean a series of bounding rolls down the steep green slope and a final crash on the rocks. I clung with taloned hands to the tufts of grass, stiff and inactive, until in hot desperation I clawed my way to safety. 'Mind-forged manacles,' I dragged them over the edge with me, and sat down, wishing I had the courage to climb down again, and so to conquer my fear. I started, and drew back; I would be shackled until I died, having no courage to submit myself to the spirit's anvil, quailing before the raised hammer of the will.

There was rest for the defeated in the long grass. Jackdaws were flying against the white-broken blue of the sea; some pitched on the ivied crags farther west, and watched me. For months they had passed and re-passed this place without a cry or a check in their steady wing-beats, or flown with the rooks in the fields, each for itself; but one morning, when the rooks had flown to the Pidickswell trees, each pair to claim a nesting site and to caw satisfaction to the sky and the colony, the daws held aerial tourney high over the fields and the sea. They twirled and dived, they hurled themselves upon each other, they imitated the flight of other birds when chasing each other, they croaked deeply like ravens. Pair by pair they fell out of the revel. The place became precious in the glow of ancestral memory; the cliffs grew bright with detail. The fire of spring was kindled, and lit their pale blue eyes. Every gull was an intruder, every passing of

the delicate-winged kestrel a menace to their dreams.

Primroses were blooming among the wet tussocks of withering coarse grass; the leaves of the bluebell plants were sprouted thickly on the slopes. Suddenly, as I sat there, all the daws flew out with a rush of wings that conquered the noise of the wind, with cries of *Jank-jank! Quank!* The gulls, farther along the cliff, broke into a white wailing swirl over the sea. Looking around, I saw two herons flying below me, their broad grey wings easily visible against the brownish-yellow sands. One followed the other. The leading bird, I thought, was probably the heron I had seen many times, flying from the pond fed by the brook I had crossed; he had a regular round of fishing stances. From the pond he flew to another brook where it began to wind its deep way through the sandhills behind Cryde Bay. Now, with his mate following him from stance to stance, the dull routine was gone from his life – until the young in the tree-top nest across the estuary began to grow, when it would return again – and his world glowed with the fire of spring.

After leaving the pond, the wind had carried him off his course, and, with his mate, he had probably taken the easy way, a glide down the land until he came under the wind below North Side. And gliding nearer the sands, and the long unrolling white of the shallow sea, he had swung round, remembering the rushes and the water of his stance

in the sandhills. His mate swung round after him, and the long beat upwind began.

The big hollow wings beat steadily, lifting into the wind the narrow bodies with the long legs held stiffly straight behind. They rose higher and higher, above the reddish line of the Woolcombe houses three miles away, above the black houses under the hill-line, and into the blue sky over the Morte; but they grew no larger in my sight. Many gulls and daws, blown erratically by the gale, swirled about them like grey and black ashes of paper above invisible flames. One minute, two minutes, three minutes – my head was tilted more and more, but they made no forward progress. Other gulls joined the pestering flock, some of them following the herons, until at last the grey birds turned downwind and glided towards the cottages of Vention. I watched them trying to cross the base of the headland, by Stentaway lane, where the ground was lower; but when they met the wind again their wing-beats only lifted them higher. After awhile, they turned and glided down to the sands, where they pitched, and rested side by side.

THE BLACKTHORN BRAKE

My way lay westwards along one of the many cattle-paths which the cloven feet had beaten in the grassy slope, where plants of primroses and

bluebell bulbs, turned purple by the light, were broken out of the dark brown soil.

The path I followed led through a brake of trees with trunks of a thickness between a child's wrist and a bullock's body, but of the same height; a wood of wind-dwarfs, interworn by cattle-paths, each tree the shape of a blown candle-flame. The biggest tree was an elm on which one could almost spread a cloak and recline. Tufts of reddish cow-hairs were on many stumps of trees which had failed.

Under branches spread parallel with the slope of the ground, the celandines were flat and starved, the small-leaved primrose plants were without flowers, dwarf bluebell leaves were either cropped or crushed.

Further on were thorns, both black and white, their only branches bent away from the salt sea; the ingrowing twigs were thick like hair. Shaggy mosses and lichens made them look very ancient. So thickly were their twigs ingrown that, although it was possible to look down at them from a few feet away up the slope, I could not tell if their small tops held magpies' nests or not. Here was a thorn six feet tall, crowned by an elongated ball of spiky twigs the size of a magpie's nest: but surely it was a magpie's nest? The magpie tops her nest with thorns, entering by a hole at the side: I peered at the black mass, a rolled-up hedgehog of a bush-top; yes, there was a twig of elderberry, cunningly

worked like a joist through the mass. It was an old nest; last spring's twigs had matted its roof, so that it must have been almost draught-proof. While I was gingerly feeling for the opening I heard a chatter below, and saw the black-and-white flickering of a magpie before it vanished in the brake lower down.

Like the spirits of men, the trees are the shape of their suffering. The everlasting talons of the wind pierce them; the salt spray blights their buds as they break, corrupts the edges of the opening leaves, ruins the tender stems before they are set in their strength. They grow close and bent, with roots interwoven, their few branches rubbing brown sores under and against one another. The blast shakes them, and they cry out with the sharp and brittle cry of the mouse pierced by the talons of the brown wind-falcon. Do trees feel pain like men, do they despair? We know that they die.

The spirit of the tree endures, like the spirit of man, to renew hope with the sun in the sky. Here among the black and savage thorns break the blossoms of its happy morning, the all of its endurance. Nothing so innocent as the opening buds of the blackthorn; the white petal beauty is of the air, wan-travelling starlight. Delicate and coral are the stamens within the white buds of the thorn; coral the lips of the bride, virginal, sad with all loveliness and ancient sunlight.

THE RAVENS OF BLOODHILL

It was quiet in the brake on the cliff, for the wind had lessened and swung to the south: the shadows of trees did not move: the burring of the first humblebee was loud in the grove of the bullocks. Now I would have to climb again, or get my new stockings torn by brambles. The quickest and easiest way to the ravens' nest was to climb to the top of the slope of bracken, furze, and bramble, and walk on the landsherds at the edge of the fields. Cattle-paths were liable to end suddenly: they were treacherous with hidden rabbit burys, which filled the shoes with earth; and if not recently used, were overgrown with clawing loops of bramble. There were several tracks lying on and near the edge of the cliffs, but to follow them was arduous and prickly work, with much clambering up tussocks where the way rose steeply around broken hollow precipices.

By following the easy top path on the landsherds of the stony fields, where thin and wind-scythed oats grew with the charlock in summer, the mind could be given to the sea and the sky; the least attention to the way in front was needed. So strongly was the yellow charlock settled in these fields that, walking there in the late summer, it was necessary to sit down every few yards and empty the seeds, round and hard like shot, out of my shoes.

The flowers held much honey, and the bees loved them; the farmer has long since ceased to curse at his yellow fields, and accepts them as he does the scything of the wind.

The mated gulls cried out below as I passed above their nesting ledges; they floated out white in the sunshine, and joined the birds already yelping and weaving in flight against the cliff-shadows in the sea. A kestrel – the little brown falcon that luffs into the wind and watches for mice and finches in the bracken – made her dainty swoop out of the cliff, followed by her mate, who chased her through the wailing throng, flickering easily from the petulant and clumsy swoop of the gulls. High over the fields a buzzard soared in the wind, watching on still crooked wings above its eyrie in the middle bay of the Ramson Cliffs, by the big clump of bladder campion – a lodgement of sticks on which both birds recently had been standing several times a day, and preening each other's neck feathers.

I watched for the ravens along the uneven cliff-line as I stood between two fields, upon a stone-ditched wall repaired with pieces of old iron bedsteads, but I could not see them. Had they lost heart at last, and forsaken their old ledge? For the ravens of Bloodhill Cliff – I was standing on the boundary wall between Ramsons and Bloodhill – have been unhappy in their nesting for many seasons. Year after year the same things have happened. About

mid-February the first new stick of the year was added. A month later, when the sandmartins appeared, the nest was rebuilt and relined, two feet high, and in the third week the first egg was laid. The nest held five – called a clutch by the human collector – at the beginning of the fourth week. And on Easter Sunday afternoon the nest was always empty.

The ledge was in the cliff-bay directly below the end of the rabbit-tunnelled bank dividing the two fields of Bloodhill. Just over the wall, as I jumped down, there was a landsherd – lanchett, lychett, is apparently the same thing, a sherd or fragment of land – a grassy bank too steep to till, an island cut to the shape of a mussel-shell by the ploughshare. I scrambled down the slope beside the bank, and reached the long withered grasses entangling the scanty bushes of ling at the edge of the cliffs. Holding to the tussocks with taloned fingers, and making sure of footholds, I slowly raised myself and gradually, very gradually, looked over the edge.

I saw the sea and the rocks a long way down, and my nervous control stiffened and became brittle like isinglass. I sat down again gradually, and even then was not at ease. I told myself that this was foolish and unreasonable; that I could not fall; and rising again, I craned over, and looked into the ravens' nest on the ledge at the bottom of a smooth grey face of rock.

The grey rock faced the west, and slanted inwards, so that its top overhung the nest, which was made of sticks of a light colour; and peering through my glass I saw, after a terrible moment when I felt I might be swaying outwards without realising how far, that they were sticks either of dead furze or elderberry. It was lined with sheep's-wool, grasses, and the brown fibre inside the bark of dead blackthorns; and four eggs lay in the centre of the hollow. They were very small: the nest was lower than I had thought. When empty, it looked about ten feet under the cliff edge, but the nest must have been at least thirty feet down.

The scaur at the end of the grey rock was whitened, where the old birds had perched. That point was the look-out; it commanded a view along the cliffs on both sides. The raven is a cunning and very cautious bird, almost a timid bird when he sees a man; but he is not always wise. He will choose several look-out places, a minor perch near the nest, and a major perch or perches on the top of the cliffs – one of them was on the bedrail stuck in the boundary bank above – where he cannot be overlooked by man, his only enemy. Nevertheless, year after year he will return to the same ledge, although year after year either the eggs or the young birds are stolen.

Usually, on Good Friday, two or three youths come out from Cryde village, with ropes and an iron bar, which they drive into the earth above the

grey sloping rock. Then they tie one rope round the chest of the climber, and hitch the other round the base of the bar. Sometimes there is one rope and one bar, and the climber descends hand under hand; the distance is so slight that he does not need to be hauled up on the second rope. The eggs of the raven do not appear to be worth anything, unless it happens that a visiting 'gennulman' has said that he would like to buy a clutch. Once I saw a boy holding two in his hand, which he had blown with a thorn; and asking him where he had got them, he replied that 'several Cryde chaps' had got them that morning.

AUTHENTIC CASES OF SALVATION

The younger 'Cryde chaps' were not superstitious about the ravens, as were the Kift brothers – John and 'Tiger' among them, men more than sixty years old. John Kift explained to me that one Sunday, when they were young men living at Southside Farm, they went ferreting on the Bloodhill slopes; and suddenly flushed the two ravens off the nest, where they appeared to have been dozing together. They must have been very young birds, he said. They shot them, and saw them splash into the sea.

Returning some time later, they saw a raven flying away from the ledge, a raven with a white pinion-feather which they recognised as the hen-

bird of the Southside nest. She had been taking food to the helpless young in the nest below them. The men stared at each other. They remembered the story of Elijah; and now the Lord had sent the spicketty bird to feed the orphan birds. 'And I'd never shoot a raven, not if you was to offer me a hundred pounds for to do'n!' declared John Kift to me, when telling me this story.

As I passed Cox's Cliff, a few minutes after leaving the raven's nest, I remembered a similar story, which old Muggy Smith of Cryde once told me. Below Cox's Cliff is a flat rock, about half as big again as a farm butt, showing only at low tide. It is balanced on other rocks at the landward end of a narrow channel lying north and south. At low spring tides fishermen can stand on the rock, which gives a good grip to nailed boots owing to the small shell-fish encrusting it, and cast their conger-lines in the direction of the Morte Church, whose square grey tower stands in the hills across the bay. If truly cast, the lines, weighted with bits of old iron, splash into the channel, where, among the heavy ribbons of the thong weed, conger eels pass in their grey, cold-eyed roving.

One Good Friday, the wind being favourable, a north-easter that made no waves, two men were fishing from the flat rock. One felt the snatch and tugs of a conger's bite, and hauled in rapidly, but the tugs increased so considerably that the fisherman's mate grasped him round the middle as he

pulled in the line. Slowly the end was drawn to the rock, and they saw, to their amazement, a conger eel with two heads – a monstrous eel as thick as a man's thigh. After cutting the line, they removed their hats, remembering that it was Good Friday. Never again would they go fishing on Sunday or Good Friday, they declared fervently in the inn on their return. 'A master gr't conger swallowing a smaller conger after it had been hooked?' suggested Muggy. Even so, the men were convinced of their wrong-doing; and in due course two regular chapel members, in white clothes, obtained salvation by being immersed in the tank under the chapel floor.

I recalled another case of salvation, of which there are so many variants in the human species; a case vouched for by no less an authority than the wife of a parson. A remark of mine about the late War being sanctified by various high ecclesiastical authorities in Europe, following upon an 'unsolicited' reading of H. M. Tomlinson's *The Nobodies*, in a certain drawing-room, where I had invited myself in a hopeful moment, so disturbed her that she told me, with a genuine emotion which ended the argument in silence, the story of a very dear friend whose husband was taken during the War because she, the wife, had loved her husband more than God. They were free-thinkers, like myself, and had not gone to church; but now, to the widow in her loneliness, her error had been revealed; and there

was no one among the parishioners who attended church more regularly than she. Not that God hadn't taken His time, for He had: He had waited patiently while she had dabbled in spiritualism.

John Kift, one of the brothers who shot the ravens, was one of the 'saved,' as they call the metamorphosis in the village. He confided to me in the Higher House one morning how it had been brought about. I wrote down his words immediately after he had told me. 'I don't go neither to Church or Chapel, I don't: they'm a lot of bliddy rogues, and no better than you nor me; they go zinging psalms a Sunday, and the next day they'm just as likely to be staling from ye. But I believe in God's Houses, mind; I love God's Houses. And I'll tell 'ee for why.' He lowered his thin-nostrilled nose, with its sharp point, together with his voice, sharp usually with assertiveness. 'I'll tell 'ee for why. One Saturday, I says to myself, in a bit of a temper, "I'll finish that job, I will, I'll go right ahead and finish'n." And I did. And on Monday morning, I was cut down bad.' Shyly, in a quiet voice, but with assertiveness returning, 'I reckon Jesus Christ cut me down. And I never worked no more on a Sunday, nor never will, not if you was to pay me a hundred pounds. Noomye!'

'How do you mean, "cut down"?' I enquired.

'Why, I had this yurr bloomin' influenza,' he replied.

When I told this story to the parson's wife, on

the occasion of my hopeful reading of *The Nobodies*, she laughed, calling it nonsense; but suddenly her face became grave, and she said, 'If the dear old man has faith, does it matter so much as all that? Wasn't it possible to be too materialistic? If he believed, wasn't that all that mattered? Such simple faith should not be laughed at (I had not laughed) and, after all, who were we to say what might have been the Hidden Purpose in the affair? Did not God move in a Mysterious Way, His Own Way, which was not man's way?

Then I told her the story of the mysterious movement of the simple old man's donkey, which, after many years of simple work, had disappeared: and on the day following its disappearance a farmer was busy, two miles away, in the valley of Anneswell, with hauling tackle in position over one of the hillside shafts of the disused iron mines; for one of his men, happening to pass by in the bracken, had heard groans, and it was thought that a bullock had fallen down the shaft. A flaming furze bush was thrown over the edge, and the light went out; another was thrown, and that too went out. The air at the bottom of the shaft was foul, and it was not wise for a man to descend. As they were listening to the groans someone saw greyish hair on the outjutting rocks of the ragged edge of the shaft; and, examining it, they thought it was not the hair of a bullock. In the evening, the farmer called at Mr. Kift's cottage, and asked Mrs. Kift

where the donkey was; and Mrs. Kift said, 'My husband shute'n, and buried'n to the bottom of the garden.' The farmer (who told me this story) then told her how he had been working with the hauling tackle in Anneswell, after a bullock that was supposed to have fallen in over, and to be lying at the bottom of a mine shaft; but it wasn't bullock's hair they found, but donkey's. Mrs. Kift went upstairs to tell her husband, and returned saying, 'I told'n what you said, and he jumped out of bed twice as quick as a' got into'n.'

When I had recounted this story to the parson's wife, she said that he ought to have been thrown down a shaft himself, just to see how he liked it. But why? I asked her: the simple old man does not know what he is doing. The Raven, the Influenza, the destruction of the donkey too old to work, and otherwise unmarketable – surely all these things were the same thing: why then does one please as an act of simple faith, and another induce a wish for a repetition of the pain of dying slowly after being pushed over the edge of a mine-shaft?

INTERLUDE

Had one of the strangers who are mentioned in Thomas Hardy's books been present on the western extremity of the Corpsnout Headland in North West Wessex, upon a certain afternoon in March, he might have observed a solitary human figure walking rapidly, with a serious aspect of countenance, over the short turf of that bleak terrain, which, cropped and re-cropped by sheep, was immemorially refined by the incisors of rabbits living in the stone-ditched walls enclosing the most westerly fields of the promontory. Had he been of an enquiring frame of mind, the stranger might have speculated upon the apparent haste of the man, whose lips in a thin, almost cadaverous face, were moving as though in declamation against some apparition invisibly pacing at his side.

As he drew nearer to the edge of the cliffs, the apparition appeared to induce a species of rage in the perambulating man, for he suddenly shouted, and once, as though to escape from his mental demon, he thwacked the turf violently with the long hazel staff in his right hand. These percussions travelled in the rock lying just under the thin layer of vegetation, and communicated themselves to the aforesaid rabbits, causing them, with the shouts in the wind sibilating through the stone chinks of their warren, to crouch with increased immobility.

And had one of the celestial visitants of William Blake been present, he would have rejoiced, for as the point of the headland was reached, a few links of the mind-forged manacles, released by curses, fell clanking on the rocks below, thus making the way unencumbered for enjoyment of the rest of the walk.

THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING

3.

THE PEREGRINE FALCONS

One of the South Side ravens watched me from a jut of rock as I lay on the lip of the precipice, breathing the wild thyme of the sward. While I lay there in the sun two peregrines flew swiftly over the cliffs, stooping upon each other in play. I could hear the buffets of their wings as they touched in the air, crying the shrill spring chatter of joy, falling as though with wings wrapped round one another. The female was a third as big as the tiercel, or male. I hoped to see them fall upon one of the gulls which were flying in the hollow of the cliffs, but they ignored them. Sometimes a gull left the floating wailing throng and pursued a falcon: the sharp black wings flickered, and the gull was easily out-distanced.

The stoop, or dive, of the falcon is magnificent. He shuts his wings and dives head first at so steep an angle that it appears to be a perpendicular drop. It is not a swooping down, but a drop of a bundle of sinew, muscle, bone, and feathers compressed between the barb of wings, directed by fearless

power concentrated in one terrible thing – the intentness of the eyes.

The shags on the rock below, holding out their umbrella-segment wings to dry, watched them with anxious jerks of their thin black heads.

After their play the falcons rose on the wind until they were six hundred feet above me, 'waiting on their pitches,' in the term of falconry. They remained still in the wind. The wings were bent back, sharp and dark, the head blunt, the tail thick, short, and stocky. Whereas the windhover, or kestrel, can remain still in a favourable wind by constant delicate shiftings in its leaning, the peregrine appeared to cut its hover, as it were, by suppressed force.

A little finch or pipit came fluttering in from the sea, a frail-looking thing of flight, fluttering to reach the land after its rough journey in the wind. Had it come from Lundy, or Ireland? One of the falcons tipped up, flickered blackly, *swished* down, and curved up again as though it controlled the force of gravity. The small bird struggled on, and the larger falcon stooped. She too missed. Her speed carried her, like the tiercel, almost into the waves; she swooped up without a wing-beat, and within a few seconds two black stars were motionless on their pitches again, six hundred feet above my head. I waited in dread for the struggling pipit, but after the first colossal dives they ignored it, and it fluttered to the cliff-face, and crouched on a

green hummock of sea-thrift near me, its beak open as it panted.

The wind blew up the cliff, shaking old heads of sea-thrift; the pipit began to preen its wing feathers; the black stars, with never a flicker, turned down the wind and slid across the sky and out of sight along the North Side. The shags on their white rock below seemed easier; a general preening of neck-feathers began, shaking of tails, and flapping of wings. A bird squatting on a higher pinnacle, apart from the others, continued to cock an anxious eye at the sky. The raven sat still and huddled on his scaur; the lower part of his body was hidden by rock, but his eye saw all that moved. One of the shags jumped off into the wind, swung round, and beat its big black wings steadily over the sea, just above the troughs of the waves. Another launched itself into the wind, flying towards Cryde Bay, followed by a third and a fourth, while a strange cormorant appeared flying down the wind to the rock; it slowed into the wind, alighted on a perch just quitted, and opened its wings. Its head seemed rather large, and looking through my glass I saw that it had caught a flatfish, which it could not swallow. It opened its wings and gulped, half ejected the fish, and gulped again; then settled down with the tail sticking out, waiting until there was more space in its crop.

On the sward lie many small white feathers of gulls; and, among the broken hummocks of the

sea-thrift, which cover the headland with pink, wind-trembling flowers in May, are fragments of blue shells, crab-claws bleached white, fish bones, and sometimes a rabbit bone, thrown out of the crops of the gulls which rest here when no human figures move into the sky above their green slopes.

MAN TO ANIMAL

While I sat there, on the grass and the thyme, which I shall love forever because I learnt to know it first in the *Story* of my dear Jefferies, an animal was lying near me. It had, for some reason possibly not known even to itself, made almost the same journey as I had made since leaving the village. Half the time it had been digging in a hole in the ground, tearing at grass and thrift roots with its teeth, throwing out earth between its hind legs, which often were the only portion of it visible; the other half it had been lying, panting, shaggy with earth, twenty paces away, watching me with its yellow eyes.

I have not mentioned this beast before, because, to be candid, I had scarcely thought of it at all. Its presence has become as usual as my stick or my boot, both of which it knows in a variety of attitudes. For years it has been walking where I have walked, usually uninvited; for years it has been living in my house, and sleeping in my chairs when it did not choose to sleep in another chair in another cottage, which, for a night or two, had taken its fancy.

It spends most of its days lying outside the cottage, usually in the middle of the road, curled up in cold weather and lying on its side in hot weather, now in the ditch to cool, and now in the sun to get warm again – a dozen changes each sunlit hour. Motor-cars come down the lane; their brakes suddenly squeal, and I hear them pulling up; I know then that the animal is comfortable, if not asleep. Often the car passes over the brown hairy circle, which may then raise a weary head and stare bemusedly at the rear number plate, before settling on paws again, having decided that the exhaust note is unfamiliar.

When the numerous dinner-smells move about the village airs, it gets up and trots away; but before the church clock strikes twice it is back again in the road, awaiting the rattle of the loose lock on the front door. Its head lifts alertly; and if it sees a figure or figures, the animal is liable to stretch and yawn, especially if it sees sticks; and, if certain that the figure is going out for a walk, and not merely to the shop or the pub, it will jump on its hind legs and flack its tongue with the excitation of its thoughts.

It has been behaving like this for eight years now, ever since it followed me, after thirty shillings had changed pockets, from the blacksmith's steps in Cryde village to my cottage in Ham. Although only eight weeks old at the time, it was 'lousy as a cuckoo,' as my neighbour Revvy observed on its

arrival; now it is eight years old almost to the day, and still lousy as a cuckoo. Periodically it is deloused, a process which makes it whine and shiver; and periodically Mother Nature, 'ever providing for her own,' allouses it again. To observant visitors, arriving during one of the provident periods, we explain that it 'picks up insects from the sheep in the fields.'

Every year I have to pay 7s. 6d. so that this animal may continue to sleep in my chairs, eat the bones that fall from my table, bark at cats and unfamiliar figures, act as a pony to my son and other village children, provide a mattress for the cat and her kittens on cold winter nights, and a half-wit companion for myself during my walks. I am told that when I leave the village in my motor-car the animal waits and watches in the lanes until I return, although the period of waiting and watching may be several months. This seems an extraordinary service in return for a few bones and biscuits, a chair which it can, and does, get elsewhere, an original deposit of thirty shillings, the cheapest possible collar, and occasional motor rides on the floor under someone's feet.

As I sit here on the edge of the precipice, watching the bright flicker of waves on far sky-meeting sea, I marvel that this animal should be, to many men and women and children, but to one in particular, so single-minded, so jovial, so selfless in its devotion: and when I consider that often I am careless and

unkind, and vile to it in my moodiness and irritability; that if I speak harshly to it the brightness goes from its eyes, and the straightness from its back; and yet at a releasing word, no matter how incomprehensible the harshness, its whole being lights up and dances with gratitude; and when I consider, moreover, that I have an immortal soul according to the church, and this animal has none—.

Had the aforesaid Hardy stranger been present, he might have heard the name *Biell!* several times as the animal was rolled several times on the ground with my foot; and, after paw and hand had been shaken together, he might have heard the declaration of a promise to bathe the animal in disinfectant on the morrow, without fail: a promise which was received by the half-wit animal with marked but temporary dejection.

THE WALL ABOVE SOUTH SIDE

The wailing of gulls increased as my dog and I moved up the sloping grass. By which way should I return? The regular South Side path, cut in the slope above the break of the cliffs, led to Cryde Bay; but I remembered that dogs were forbidden on the path. It would be more pleasant on the higher path, beside the stone wall at the top of the down, guarding the fields from the winds and furze and brambles of the waste land.

Like most of the walls built on high places, this wall was beautiful with lichens. Where it met the full force of the Atlantic wind its base was fortified by clumps of sea-thrift, in clumps of green strength and brown ruin according to age. The south-west wind had driven the seeds of the thrift into the crevices between the stones, from which the earth originally binding them had long since been scoured, and there they had sprouted, to explore the inner earth with their long tentacle roots. Rabbits dig tunnels in the wall, but their holes are not numerous in the length built above the Point: this is the home of the thrift roots, and, on the higher stones, of the grey-green lichens which flourish best in the salty driven spume.

Along the wall, where it turned inland, beside the green path in the furze, the grey lichens changed to orange-yellow disks spreading flat on the grey stone; the clumps of sea-thrift were seen only occasionally. Foxglove plants grow in the southern ditch, their dry summer stalks leaning out of leaves dark green and eager with new life. The wall was topped with slabs of stone which were bonded and kept in place by a layer of soil; and on this soil lived the poorest plants, which all their lives must struggle to be themselves in the place where their seeds were lodged by wind or birds. Here was a sow-thistle which, had the wind rolled the seed over the wall, might have grown as high and straight as my little boy; but it was lodged in a

crevice between two stones, and there it must live, there it must make its seeds, and there it must die. Every wind scoured more earth from the crack, every rain washed more rootlets bare, but it hung on, although the gusts shook it and wore away its minute leaves. The tap-root that held it was fibrous like string; the leaves, no larger than the wings of a wasp, had turned purple, the colour of last hope, to absorb more of the vital sun-rays. A rabbit had eaten half the milky-dashel in one bite. Milky dashel, milky thistle, is the name given it by village boys, who seek the sow-thistle in the hedges for their tame rabbits; its sap is white. There the poor milky dashel endured, one of the hopelessly unfit of the dashel or thistle tribe, waiting to put forth its yellow bloom in the spring.

Seeing its human equivalent, what would be our thoughts? Of the poor thistle, I know this: there was no destitution in the seed when it was lodged there.

MIDDLEHILL LANE

Over the wall was a goyal, or valley, with a gaunt farmhouse standing near the sky. By striking across the fields I should come to Cryde by the sunken lanes, and so avoid the boarding-houses of the bay, with their names like Lorna Doone, and Belle Vue.

I climbed over the wall, and crossed the valley.

After climbing several gates, and passing along hedges, I came to the first lane, called Middlesborough. It was the width of a horse-butt, and its stony bottom was also the bed of a brook, which ran fast and shallow and very clear. A fine walk to bring a beloved, whose feet must be kept dry. The water fills the lane for two hundred paces, four hundred if burdened, and, further on, it is very wild and lovely with rushes and brooklime. There it joins its brother of the Middlehill, also secret and sunken between high mixed hedges of ash, elm, thorn, and oak. Thence it slopes gently down for a mile, wandering crookedly, making a three-way junction with Ramson and Broadhill Lanes.

At the join, the base of the lane was deep under the hedges; and at the beginning of Ramson Lane which leads uphill to the Ramson fields I had passed on my outward journey, a carter standing in a butt could scarcely touch the overarching branches above with his whip.

The lane was sunken deep between the fields. It was dark even on the brightest summer day. The tracks of sled runners and butt wheels were worn a hand-span deep in the soft yellow rock, and the iron shoe-tips of horses had grooved a rugged trough between them. Water ran in both wheel and foot tracks, smoothing and abrading them with its everlasting patience. Walking up the green tunnel, I could see in the sides of the lane no mark of pick or blasting bar; the stratum was of shale

shillets, and the walls so straight that it was hard to believe that sled and wheel and water alone had cut so deeply into the rock.

Beyond the tunnel the sun was hot on my face, and the rock was warm. I sat down, and leaned on my elbow, letting the earth bear me as it would, letting all thought float away as the gossamers gleaming in the gentle ambient air. The thorns matted on the blue sky were still as the dry bleached grasses entangling their exposed roots: so silent and quiet the sunlit air that the sough and whistle of a bird flying over the lane two fields away told quicker than sight that the bird was a wild rock pigeon. Here the primroses were large and warm – always they were big in this lane – and I saw in my mind a thin wizened little man, with a bunch of primroses in his hand, a little man with grey hair and small face, with the sharp nose and eyes of a poet; a poet ruined by some inner drought. He used to be seen about the village, talking rapidly to whomsoever would listen to him, wearing a short black cape over his thin shoulders, with a small close-fitting tweed cap of a previous century on his small head. Once he had told me that he had been a master at Eton; or else it was that his wife was the daughter of an old Eton master; he was usually incoherent and I did not usually listen to him: no grain in his words, only chaff.

One spring – it was soon after the War, during the great drought – he met me coming down

Ramsons Lane. I frowned to see him in the lane here, waiting for me, as I came down from the headland. He was a bore; he broke into your reverie with a vehement declaration about whatsoever he was, not very coherently, thinking at the moment. He enquired, with gesticulations, and many jerky pointings of his ebony stick, my opinion on the origin of the sunken lane. Was it not most curious? He had been much puzzled by it: no one in the village seemed to know anything about their own country. Why so deep at the junction? Had I considered that problem? Had I? Had the idea of smuggling presented itself to me? What? Cover from the spy-glasses of revenue men on Middlesborough Hill, what? Wasn't it feasible? Would I care to use the idea in a novel of adventure? He would present me with the idea: my imagination must do the rest. Well, all my imagination did was to curse him; I was not pleased to see him, and he must have known it from my face. I hurried away from him, leaving him staring after me. I remember that the primroses were wilting in his grasp.

He did not find anyone with whom he could talk and ease his mind of its scorched and congested thoughts; a little queer in the head, it was said, and so he was avoided. Once he invited me to tea, and I accepted; but I kept away. No one called to see him in his cottage near the sea, he was shabby and insignificant; and when he died of a nervous malady soon afterwards, no one in the village went

to his funeral. For some years now he has been forgotten: I do not know why he has risen in my mind to-day, when the air is so warm and still, and the living water glistens on the rock, and the sun shines on grass and tree and flower and all happy living things. Little sharp-nosed man, lonely hedge-peerer, come you out of the darkness, and I will listen to you.

THE WAY HOME

I left the village of Cryde by the bend in the road where stood its newest boarding-house, until last year the water-mill which had ground corn during four hundred years; past Fig Tree Farm, a white-washed building beside the road, before which grew a fig-tree with two grey trunks bound and held together by linked iron bands, a Samson of a tree, contorted with the struggle for freedom, which had sunk the rusty iron into its limbs, while with its roots it strove to heave up the walls and stone floors of the house; past the Baptist Chapel where the two men fishing for eels on Good Friday had found salvation; past the strange apparition of the jawbone of an ox hanging in the hedge, supported by inter-twining vines of honeysuckle and bearded with moss about its yellow teeth; past the cottage of the parish nurse, brightened with blue paint; past the hollow interior of the pump-shed papered with bills announcing auctions, circuses, and political meet-

ings; past the row of cottages which formed the hamlet of Cross – but I had to stop in the middle of the row, and speak to Grannie Parsons. She was peeping out of the door of her cottage like a jenny wren out of its nest. The cottage was in the middle of the row; it was the smallest cottage in the parish. It began at the door above three steps, then came a tiny window beside the door; and that was all. It was scarcely so long as a horse-butt. It had one room downstairs, and one 'up auver'; and a raised garden under the window of the living-room, about one yard square, enclosed by stone ditching. No garden so neat as Grannie Parsons' garden, which had been dug to-day, by the look of it: one wall-flower, one sweet-william, one pink, a border of saxifrage, and, in the midsummer heat, seven great scarlet poppies – that was her garden. Nodding and smiling, with the shyness of a young maid, Grannie Parsons, in her soft voice, tells me 'tes proper weather, midear, tes butiful weather, and the l'il grass-bird be back by the stream.'

So Grannie Parsons, whose children have long since grown up and flown away, heard it this morning – the little grass-bird – the chiff-chaff, the celandine among birds, whose plain-song is so precious as it comes hopefully over the border of winter; and Grannie Parsons called me midear, a usual term of greeting, but truly a thing of sweetness and light when spoken, scarcely more than whispered, from the small brown face, with

the bright eyes, and smiling withered lips. All the beauty I had known that day: of wandering air and bright water, the white innocence of thorns, the scent of wild thyme on the headland, the happy burr of the honey bee, the sunward lark-song, the glistening, flowery constellations and red plastic mud of windy spring: all the beauty of the day was fused and made one for me.

It seemed that I came home to my village very swiftly.

HAM SAINT GEORGE

As I walked round the corner of Church Street, I heard singing. The Lower House stands at the corner; and on the threshold I saw the landlord, leaning against the wall, smoking, an amused expression on his face. He was watching a group of people down by Hole Farm. 'Something going on,' he observed laconically, and spat beside his dog, the famous badger-digging terrier, known as the Mad Mullah.

Thunderbolt, the retired dairy farmer, was there, standing by the stream, leaning one elbow on the wall of a cottage garden: his wife stood outside her gate, talking to a neighbour: the white face of Bessie, her sister-in-law, peered round the gateway. Several children stood in the road, watching the singing stranger.

'Some tramp, I reckon,' said John Kift, coming

round the corner. 'He came zinging outside my place, but I told'n to get out. Some tale about starving, but us'v 'all heard that yarn before, I reckon. You've got to look out for yourself these days, or you'd soon be nowhere at all. Noomye!'

'Aiy,' said the landlord, and spat neatly by the tip of the Mad Mullah's ear. I saw it flick and tremble.

I walked down. A bell tinkled behind me, and a man passed on a bicycle. I had passed the same man by the blacksmith's shop, holding a book and pencil in his hand, and speaking earnestly to the blacksmith.

As I went by the doleful singing, I saw, in a quick covert glance, a man in a worn grey suit too large for him, with a muffler round his unshaven chin. His boots were too long, and of a light pattern known as dress-boots, with buttons, and cracked across the toe-cap. The heels had dropped off. The man was singing a hymn, or the first verse of a hymn; but as I went by, he stopped, muttered to himself, and turned away.

Beggars rarely come to the village of Ham.

Mrs. Thunderbolt moved towards me, half-confidentially.

'Who is he, d'you know?' she whispered. 'Do you think he is all right? What a voice! Like a crow's, isn't it? My word, he's hoarse. I shouldn't think he gets very much, should you? Of course one can never tell whether they are genuine or not,

can you? There are so many strange characters going about to-day. And whoever can that be, talking to Bessie?'

The man with the notebook and pencil had leant his bicycle against the wall, and was speaking to her sister-in-law. Bessie turned her ear to hear, and I heard her mumble doubtfully, as her pale face moved in negation, 'Oh, I can't say for sure. No, I don't think so, not to-day, thank you.'

'But, do you realise, madam, that if this monstrous new text is passed through Parliament it is definitely a step towards Rome?'

The last words, poured out earnestly, were cut off by the angle of the barn. I entered my cottage, and sat down to tea with my wife and son; I was raising my teacup, with a sigh of contentment, when I saw the tramp pause outside in the lane. He looked at the cottage doubtfully, then up the lane; walked away a few slow steps, then returned, and began to sing again. The same hymn:

Onward, Christian Soldiers, marching as to war.

'What a rokken ol' noise,' said my little boy.
'Rotten it is,' I agreed.
'Wha' for is it a rokken noise, dad?'
'Ah, the causes are beyond your understanding.'
'Wha' for?'
'Oh, shut up.'
'Who, me up-up?'
'Yes.'

'Wha' for?'

'John Kift, his belly full of cabbage and rabbit, said the man had told him he was starving,' I told my wife. 'And that he had heard that tale before.'

'Wha' for the man 'e tol' Jan Kift starvin', Mum?'

'He's probably had no dinner and no tea, dear,' said my wife, smoothing the little boy's hair.

'Wha' for 'at man 'e 'ad no tea?'

A bicycle wheel moved across the open gateway, and stopped. The singing also stopped. The cyclist in the dark suit walked quickly up the path, and knocked at the door.

'Good afternoon,' he said, looking at me through his rimless glasses. Past his head, I saw the hymn-singer moving away.

'Don't go away,' I shouted. 'Half a minute!'

The shabby figure hesitated. 'Wait a minute!' I called again, and looked at the dark-suited man before me.

He wore a clipped brown moustache, and his face was thin; his brown eyes small and inscrutable, were fixed on mine.

'Would you please add your name to my list, protesting against the introduction of the New Prayer Book?' he said. 'Every one is of vital importance if we want to retain the authentic and authorized version of our Prayer Book.'

'I really do not know much about the controversy,' I said, 'and so my name, if I write it in your book, would have no real spiritual value.'

After hesitation, the shabby figure in the lane was moving on again.

'Ah, but surely you cannot regard with complacency the changes which are threatened, which, in effect, are the most insidious——'

'To be honest, I do not care what is changed in the Prayer Book,' I replied, feeling suddenly tired. 'Why not two Prayer Books? It will give a little variety to children who, forced to go to church, are like dogs awaiting their masters in the street, always on the look-out for something interesting to happen. Just think——'

'It is hardly a subject for cynicism,' he replied. 'It is very real, if only you knew. Do you realise, sir, that this New Prayer Book is definitely a step ——'

'Towards Rome? Yes, I heard you. And really, you must forgive me repeating it, but I don't care what happens to the Prayer Book. Oh, damn – he's gone away, and I wanted to give him some tea. Would you like some tea?'

He put the book back into his pocket. 'No, thank you,' he said coldly, and turned away.

'You see, I'm not a churchman,' I explained, as he lifted his bicycle around. 'I quite understand how you feel about it, and am sorry if I am unsympathetic, but – well – I believe that the letter killeth. Come in and have some tea, won't you.'

'It is to Another you must make your explanations. Good afternoon,' he replied, and mounting his bicycle, he rode away.

A small figure, wearing bib and holding biscuit, appeared by my side. "At poor man with bikkerkull, 'e wouldn't 'ave no tea, where be'n tu (to) dad?' enquired my son in broad dialect.

'I'm afraid I hurt his feelings,' I replied. 'So you see I am no good really.'

'Wha' for no gude, dad?'

'Shut up, I want to find the singing man.'

'That poor singin' man, where be'n tu (to), dad? Can 'e have my bikky, 'at poor man 'e didn't have no dinner and no tea, dad? Where be'n tu?'

'Gone.'

'Wha' for?'

'Fed up.'

'Oh.'

I listened. I heard the curt, rather loud, tones of Mr. Bullcornworthy, the policeman.

'Dad, wull 'e come and play trains and tar ingines with me?'

'No.'

'Wha' for? Where be ee guin, dad?'

Walking round the corner by Hole Farm, I saw the village policeman speaking to the tramp. Several more children were there now; and John Kift, the man who would not shoot a raven. Thunderbolt still leant against the wall: his wife, having moved to someone else in order to discuss the event, was watching too, her eyes alert with curiosity.

'You get out of it,' said the policeman, 'and look smart about it, my lad.'

The tramp, who had a long-drawn hollow scar in his cheek, said something, and the policeman said, in a more threatening voice, 'I don't want no answers from you! Just you clear out sharp, while you've got the chance.'

Thrusting hands in pockets, the tramp gave us all a scornful glance, and walked away up the hill.

'Too many of they bliddy rogues, who won't work, about the country,' exclaimed John Kift, after the silence in which the tramp was watched round the corner. 'On the dole, I reckon. Come out from Town to see what they can pick up.'

'Well, I mean to say, you never know, do you?' said Mrs. Thunderbolt, half confidentially, moving over to us. 'That's the trouble, you can never tell the genuine man looking for work from the man who might be a burglar. I didn't like the look of his eyes: if you noticed, I don't know whether you noticed it, but I did: his eyes never looked you in the face, but kept mostly on the ground. They say you can never trust a man whose eyes won't look at yours, don't they? I think there's something in it, myself. Now that man with the Prayer Book petition, he could look you fair and square in the eyes. Did you sign your name?' she turned to me.

I told her, 'No, I didn't sign my name.'

'I did; but Bessie wouldn't: nor would Will.' Her voice lowered and became entirely confidential. 'Will's very timid about signing his name, you know.

They say the Rector and that man had the greatest argument. In fact, they say the Rector shouted at him: "Get out of here!" he cried. D'you believe it? The Rector feels very strongly about having the New Prayer Book, so they say.'

'Dad!' cried a voice from my cottage. 'Come on in yurr, and have 'or tea, wull 'ee come?'

As I went back, the low rays of the sinking sun dazed my eyes; and suddenly I remembered the longcripple's mate on the shard of red earthenware under the wall of the barn. Among the old nettle stalks I found it, battered and broken by stones.

THE OLD COB COTTAGE

For those who were born there, or who are of the working life, the village has two parts of a name – Higher Ham and Lower Ham – often pronounced Am. Higher Ham is north of the church, and most of the cottages stand in a row beside Stony Hill, which is an exact and sufficient description of the place. The hill lies east and west, and a horse drawing a butt has to pull its hardest, on the toes of its iron shoes, for fifteen or sixteen yards before easing up opposite the Higher House, where the rugged grey shale surface is smoothed under the threshold by the feet of hundreds of years. Thereafter the pull eases off on a slight incline for fifty yards, where the cottages end, and the red lane leads on level between high hedges away from the village.

Seen from the glebe field opposite Stony Hill, the cottages were roofed unevenly, but all of them were lime-washed. Near the top of the row, smallest and probably oldest, stood a little thatched cot hardly wider than the length of a horse. Its brown roof of reed – unthreshed wheat straw – rested against the rough-cast wall of its large and

modern neighbour. This neighbour had been built a year after the Great War by the hard work of Charlie Tucker, the mason builder, working himself and employing his brother, John Tucker, the mason; the work on the new building had been almost entirely inspired by a Government subsidy of £260.

Most cottages have a look of a human face about them, the upper windows being like eyes, with the door below in the place of a nose; and when I used to stroll over the glebe field, looking for the nests of larks and pipits (while the village boys were in school) the little cob cottage beside the new subsidy building seemed to me to be part of the ancient man who lived within it. The resemblance was not obvious, for the small flat white mask facing south, with its heavy thatch overhanging the single upper casement that was seldom opened, and door and lower casement, did not look like his face. Rather, it was the effect of the taller and newer cottages rising on both sides of the tiny old-fashioned cot, grey lichens on its thatch, the doorway with its rude-hewn oak lintel and its string latch, the threshold slab worn hollow, the hart's-tongue ferns which grew from the loose outer stones of the chimney, its lonely survival of thatch in the row of more modern slate roofs. Under its frontal mask of mortar, which had scaled in patches, the thick walls were mud and stones, bound by cow-dung, and held by straw. 'Cob be good lasting stuff, until the wet gets in,' said Charlie Tucker, when the oldest

inhabitant had died and been buried; and at last the windows were opened to the sun. 'But us won't see any more of they old-fashioned places built. Be 'ee coming to the auction this afternoon? 'Tis a dark li'l old place. I shouldn't care vor to live in it.' He had bought the cot ten years before for forty pounds; and had been waiting for possession.

The ancient man had lived in the cot for more than seventy years. Old men and children called him 'Sparker,' or 'Zsparker.' His name was Jacob Ley. In an oak box, about a foot square, and eight inches deep, he kept his money; five silver spoons; his marriage certificate; his dead wife's gold wedding ring, worn thin as the edge of a man's thumbnail; a thirty-year-old pencil; and a penny note-book almost filled with nigh on three hundred similar items, dated and signed, of quarterly rent received – fifteen shillings a quarter. The bottom of the box was neatly lined with a square of newspaper, a calendar of the days and months of 1882, cut from *The North Devon Herald – published bi-weekly, every Thursday morning and Monday afternoon.* I saw these things when the contents of the cot were auctioned, and the box became mine for three shillings and sixpence.

Sparker Ley, for many years the oldest man in the village, spoke a slow and beautiful dialect, the broadest I ever heard. I used to see him about Stony Hill, always with the same thick ash-staff in

his mittened hand, and his trousers hitched up below the knees with string. He was short and sturdy, with a long nose and strong, regular features, and carried nearly a hundred years with stowed strength. In the days when some of the Old Age Pensioners of the parish were children, sitting still and strained in church, overawed by the clerk and his stick kept for talking or fidgetting or otherwise being natural, Sparker was a figure of admiration in the village. Every Sunday before the annual Ham Revel he would get out of his pew, after the sermon, put his beaver firmly on his head and walk slowly up the aisle to the pulpit, and back again. This was the yearly challenge, with the silver spoons won at previous Revels stuck in the band of his hat. When he had sat down again in his pew the parson would give out from the pulpit that the men of the parish might consider themselves, after the custom of Ham village, challenged by the champion's parade to beat him at wrestling on the morrow. 'Quiet! Hold your tongues, men!' his reverence would boom; and the murmur would be silent immediately.

On the morning of the Revel, the parson, who was also squire, would observe his yearly custom. Booted and spurred, and wearing a buff-coloured double-breasted waistcoat with his cutaway riding coat, his weasel-coloured beaver, with its rough nap, pushed firm over his right temple, he would walk slowly up the drive from the rectory. He

carried a long coaching whip, with which he flicked at leaves and sticks and stones. More than a hundred men and women and children would be waiting for his reverence in the road outside the gate, silently watching his big red face, with its grey whiskers cropped short like arrish, and his hard blue eyes. A broad-shouldered shape of a man, well over six feet tall; a three-bottle man, with a fist-battered nose, relict of a lusty youth. Jacob Ley minded how his reverence was a masterpiece with a whip, for once with a single flip of his whip he had killed a dishwasher – a pied wagtail – as it was running on the grassy border of the drive.

He was greeted by a respectful chorus of 'Y'r Reverence!' as they opened a way for him to walk across the road to the stable yard, and so into the glebe field. As though clearing a way among ghostly revellers with the wide airy figures he cut with the whip, his reverence strode on, followed by the wrestlers, and greeted by the yapping of terriers tied along the hedge. There was a badger shut up in a tub under the stable wall, but that sport was for later in the day. Near the badger was a pig in a three-cornered pen of hurdles. Skittling for a live pig was one of the other big events of the Revel, with guessing the weight of a sheep, and climbing the greasy pole for a saddle of mutton. But the biggest item was the wrestling bouts.

'Off with your hats, men!' shouted his reverence,

and those going in for the wrestling, who had been awaiting the command, flung their hats at the feet of the parson. The bare-footed boys mingling in and out of the crowd began to wag their wabs in wonder and admiration, but they ceased, like the starlings which had flown up from the grass a minute since, when the clerk bawled, 'Shut that rattle, you!' and his reverence stung them with precise flips of the far-reaching lash . 'It was right and proper to trim they boys,' explained Sparker to me, for the ceremony of the ale was about to be held.

Three thirty-six gallon casks, already tapped and hissing at their spigots, lay on frames against the wall, near the ewe and the brock. Each wrestler – close-sheared for the lesser chance of a grip on his hair – took his beer-pot from his wife or maid whom he was courting, or friend, and waited for his pint. Sparker said that the ale, brewed in the rectory outhouse, in the furnace wherein parson's shirts were washed, 'put them all in proper temper.'

'Pass'n's man did boil thiccy malt, that was the tithe barley of Varmer Brown, of Crowcombe, rough broken in Bob Fowler's water-mill to Cryde. Pass'n's man was as proper a man for brewing ale as ever broke a bit of bread. 'Twas zaid one time when a' opened the zack o' malt that a master girt rat zat there scrupeting and chittering, and pass'n's man tippeth rat and malt into vurnace together. 'Twas master ale from his reverenz barrels, aiy! master stuff. 'Twould spring in flame

out of the vire when you drowed a spoonful to the hearth.'

It was the custom of the wrestling champion to spill on his hearth, for luck, a spoonful of the winner's ale brought home in his gallon firkin, or wooden keg.

After the temper of a pint had been put into his reverence and each of the 'wrestlers,' the long whip would bend and swish and crack again, clearing a way back to the hats on the grass. The polished toe of his reverence's boot would be inserted under a hat, which with a kick was sent flying, a second hat after it. Thus the two wrestlers for the first bout were selected.

Aaron Kift, the blacksmith, remembers that his father used to tell how the wrestlers came, a week or two before Ham Revel, to the smithy in order to have iron hacking caps with edges like plough-coulters hammered to the fronts of their boots. For practice they used to go, after work, to the top of Noman's Hill two miles away, where the road led down to the largest village in England, to meet the men who had walked up to meet them. On Noman's Land, a narrow incult strip at the fork of two ways, they practised on each other, and the blood ran down into their boots, and the earth was scored and trampled, and the brambles broken from the roots going down through the dust of suicides anciently buried there, each with an oaken stake through its middle, in the light of

lanthorns at midnight. A local hate and distrust existed between the villages of Ham and Crosstree, and so the practice wrestling was as hard as the championship bouts.

Long legs were not the best legs for wrestling. The shorter, sturdier man could kick quicker. He who remained off his back was the winner. Sparker was famous for his quickness in shifting and catching his opponent's hacks against the insteps and heels of his own boots; and for his terrible double kick when, in grunting fatigue, his opponent's feet came together. The first hack glanced from the shin of one leg to the ankle of the other, to be followed by a cross kick with the other boot that once cracked the ankle of the Morte champion. Sparker used to practise the cross kick on a rope stretched between posts in his garden, until he could cut it through with one kick. Nobody in the district could stand up to him from his twenty-fifth to his thirty-first year. 'It were a grand sight to watch him making his feet zspark,' the blacksmith's father had told the blacksmith. That was over sixty years ago.

On his ninety-fourth birthday I met the old champion in the lane outside his cot, and invited him to come with me to the Higher House, and drink a pint of beer. Too late I realised that a half-quartern or a quartern of whiskey would have been a better drink to put the old man in temper. I wanted him to tell me of the parson's hounds, which Sparker

used to tend and feed; a mixed and savage pack which was kennelled in a small stone shed with a hayling roof in the meadow now called Kennel Field. The hounds were fed on whole dead sheep, on rats, on each other. One night a man who hated the parson (who had flogged him for getting a girl, employed in the rectory, in the family way) went down to the Kennel shed, and knocked a hole in the slates to drop down the poisoned carcase of one of his reverence's goats. The man slipped and fell in through the hole. Next morning Sparker found the body of the goat under the outer wall, its eyes picked out and its tongue torn, with two dead rats and a magpie near it. Some buttons were also found inside the shed.

'Aiy, zur,' said old Sparker, sitting still in the corner of the Higher House, by the little round table, and sipping at a pint of sixpenny. He looked at me uneasily, having lost the habit of going to pub.

''Twas in th' days of his rev-rr-rence th'ould zsquire what you'm telling, zur.'

He finished the beer in slow and uneasy silence, and I asked him to have another; but he got up, took his stick, thanked me and said something about tilling his tetties while the ground was 'plumm.'

'Isn't it rather early for tilling potatoes?' I asked, when he had gone.

''Tis nigh on half-past seven, do 'ee see, zur,' explained Stroyle George, of Hole Farm, standing

by. 'And ould Sparker doth love to hear his clocks striking. He doth set one half-an-hour before the other, to hear them periodically.'

A grand word, periodically, culled out of *The News of the World.* Tiger Kift, waiting to play whist, enquired the meaning of the word. Stroyle George replied, 'It be simple, if you unnerstand. Many gennulmen, like the Major up to Pidickswell, leave England periodically.'

'In the winter, like,' observed the landlord of the Higher House, who was sitting in his shirt-sleeves, on a form, staring meditatively before him and picking his teeth with one of the burnt matches used as pegs in the whist scoring-block.

Tiger gave one of his intense quick frowns, and then a bellow of, 'Corbooger, if my glock ban't be a better wan than thaccy! My glock strikes periodically and in summer, the weather don't make a bliddy bit of difference!'

They were puzzled and silent, thinking that Sparker's clocks also struck in summer and winter. Stroyle George laughed. 'If that bain't the best thing I've heard for many a day!' he shouted.

'Well, 'tis like this, don't 'ee see,' explained the landlord to the puzzled Tiger. 'There be two meanings to the word. They long eddicated words often mean many things to once, if you follow my meaning.'

Tiger was silent, fearing that he was showing his ignorance. He could neither read nor write; but

there was not a man in the parish who knew the lobster holes on the north side of the headland so well as he, or the way about the rocks in a stormy night.

But Tiger remembered; for when Jacob Ley died a week afterwards, he was heard to say that, 'Clocks or no bliddy clocks, Sparker died periodically.'

Grannie Carter helped to wash and lay out the corpse in the new all-wool nightgown that Miss ——, the village benefactor, had given Sparker some years before, but which he had never used, keeping it for his coffin. Grannie Carter told me that Sparker's ankles were 'all plood (ploughed) up with blue scars.'

The auctioning of his few effects took place on Saturday afternoon, when most of the men were home from work.

The dark kitchen, or living room, was filled with village people, come for the same reasons as myself; curious to see inside the old chap's place, and hoping to get something good and cheap. Those two grandfather clocks; the oak dresser; the willow-pattern plates and dishes; the woollen blankets ('I mind Miss —— givn'n to the old chap dree Christmases agone'); the table; chairs; mattress; pillows. The dealers had not bothered to come out to such a small sale. The auctioneer stood by the blackened hearth. At first we were rather shy of our own voices. That reluctance to reveal oneself before others, which ingrowing with a sense of property

so often isolates and hardens the individual! The auctioneer made jokes to draw out our natural sense of fun.

'Nice little village, Ham. Proper little old village' (laughter). 'That's better! Someone knows I'm yurr!' (a cackle). 'Yes, sir! How's the old horse gettin' on, Varmer?' ('Aw takes I 'bout still, y'knaw, midear!' – and laughter). 'Now we're getting along proper, ladies and gentlemen. Now then, let's hear the rattle of your wabs!' (Sudden shouts of laughter at hearing a stranger use the intimate village expression). 'The first item on my list, ladies and gennulmen, is a pair of vases. Now then, who'll start the bidding at five shillings? Five shillings, five shill'gs, five shill'gs——'

'Sixpence,' says a voice.

'Sixpence, sixpence, sixpence, sixp'ns, sixp'ns, sixp'ns, sixp'ns, six' – he took up a nod – 'shilling, shilling, shill'ng, shill'ng, who'll make it one and six, going for a shill'ng, shill'ng, shill'ng, shilln'g, last chance, going for a shill'ng, come on, make it one and six, don't be shy, going for a shilling, shill'ng, shill'ng' – his hammer rapped on the table – 'Gone. Name, please? Mrs. Butt. How old's the baby, Mrs. Butt? Proper baby. Two nice blue eyes and all – (laughter) – boy or girl?' ('Get out,' says young Mrs. Butt, reddening: it is her third girl.) 'Now then, a pair of bellows, a nice pair of bellows, chance for some of you to pick up a genuine old antique. Who'll start?' Etc.

The auctioneer's success was partly due to his memory, for once having heard the name of a purchaser, he did not forget it; but used it again to inform his clerk after a further sale. The successful bidders felt more important, and their manner encouraged the more timid. I bought Sparker's old pint pot for sixpence – a beautifully light cylinder of Marland white clay, coloured brown, with white and black rings. The upper black ring had been smeared in three places by the potter, for the colour to run down the wet slip and to spread into the shape of beech trees. That pot had held the famous rectory ale, a spoonful of which had made the flames spring out of the fire! The rim of its base was worn down, the bottom cracked with fine hair lines like a fine net.

While I was admiring my pint pot, I missed the next item, which was a china figure of Napoleon Bonaparte as a young slim ensign, with a cocked hat and incredible waxed moustaches. It went to Tiger Kift for sixpence. Determined not to miss anything more that was good and olden, I bid seven shillings and sixpence for a pair of brass candlesticks. Later, I had two hollow feelings of doubt in respect of those candlesticks: the first feeling, that my recurrent nervous glances at the eyes of the chanting auctioneer were raising my own bids each time: the second, that the candlesticks had been brought to the sale for the special benefit of one such as I, for thousands of similar antique brass (Bir-

mingham) candlesticks are sold each summer to English and American visitors to Clovelly.

Mine was not the only irresponsible buying. Mrs. Clibbit Kifft was bidding for most things in her quiet, pure voice, that was like the lone sorrowing notes of a blackbird calling her young in a leafy copse. Her brown childlike eyes smiled at me from the corner where she was resting her big body. She wanted the things to furnish the bare farmhouse on the road to Morte, where she was living with her younger children, peacefully at last. But when it came to the turn of the grandfather clock, I hardened my heart. The clock did not go, but that did not matter. On the night that Sparker died, missing the hands on its winding chains, it had groaned, and struck nearly a hundred times, and ceased work. I liked to think that it had told the age of its owner. The hands were of wrought iron. Its face was painted with flowers never found along hedgerow or landsherd, but they were beautiful and of olden time. Its door inside was inscribed with the initials of the clockmakers who had cleaned it during the past hundred and forty years.

At twenty-five shillings, Mrs. Butt dropped out of the bidding. At thirty, Mrs. Revvy Carter, the mother of Ernie standing so quietly in the corner, with his sweet face watching mine high above him. At thirty-five shillings, Charlie Tucker, who muttered that a modern alarm clock was as good as that old-fashioned thing. At forty, with a mild

oath and a spittle-squirt between his boots, Stroyle George. At forty-two and six, the wife of the carpenter, whose thin and gentle face went pink as she shook her head, released from an uneasy prominence. At forty-five, with a regretful gasp out of her red round cheeks, Mrs. Clibbit Kifft. At fifty, the village schoolmaster, with a smiling shake of his head. At fifty-two and six the clock belonged to Mr. Henry Williamson, who could hardly refrain from giving a shout, and carrying the tall brown brittle case out of the place forthwith.

Afterwards, the table was sold; and the Windsor chair, worn by the back of the old man's head, and by the fireside clasp of his hands, became mine for fifteen shillings. What things of the English country I would write sitting in that chair, listening to the slow tick-tock of the clock, with its strange remote murmurs and bee-like dronings in the candle-light, and drinking out of the pot of Marland clay! While I mused, the oaken dresser was sold for thirty shillings; it was a warren of worm-holes and frass, and falling abroad. I saw Mrs. Clibbit Kifft giving her new possession a pleased and mournful look-over; and then the auctioneer led us all up the stair-boards.

There were two rooms upstairs, one more than I had expected. The back room was very small; a barn owl could hardly have made a flying turn in it, without breaking the broad downy tips of its

pinion feathers. The room was half filled with innumerable pale green stalks, rising off the floor towards the little window. Their heads, set with small leaves like green ears, were turned towards the window. Some had reached the panes of the fixed frame, and were peering among cobwebs and the dusty wings of moths. They seemed to be watching for the old man; their thin stalks were pathetic. They longed for the earth, but were doomed to the air; and the old man had longed for the air, and the earth was dark around him evermore.

After resting myself in the little room among the starving and hopeful stalks, I went into the bedroom, where stood the second grandfather clock, a painted ship moving in its face. It was not for sale; Sparker's great-grandson and heir had decided to keep it 'for the sake of the old man.'

Sparker's bed was put up first. This weighty and rusted arrangement of knobs and bosses and coupled iron webs – each about nine inches square – was bought by Mrs. Clibbit Kifft for half-a-crown. 'It will defy Clibbit, missis,' said the gaunt tenant of Hole Farm, and there was a united shout of laughter. Clibbit Kifft's violent smashing rages were notorious far beyond the parish. 'Ah, yes,' said the middle-aged woman, with a slow movement of her head. She had the eyes of a cow standing in shaded water, filled with deep patience, that suffereth old wrongs of men, and knows not hope or

despair, but submits, and is innocent. She smiled in the corner, standing under the sooted spider lines that looped and quivered with the warm air arising in the musty room. The auctioneer looked at her, hesitated, but made no comment; and sitting on the pillows, started to sell the bedding.

When the sale was over, and only those who had goods to claim and pay for were remaining, I looked around the kitchen. It was a lime-ash floor, of the kind never laid nowadays, when cement is everywhere available. Those old floors were made of gravel, carted from Cryde Bay at the low spring tides, and mixed with the ashes of slaked lime, and a quart or two of cider. For days, and nights too, it had been trodden under foot, until all the air-bubbles were broken out of the hardening mass. Under the slide and press of boot-nails through the years the floor had taken on a hard and polished surface. Around the hearth the floor was chipped and cracked and troughed with blows of axes which had missed the chopping block.

The pitcher, filled from the pump under the rectory wall a hundred yards away – through the cottage garden, and down the sunken lane parallel to Stony Hill, and all the way up again – had made its last dull-ringing sound as it was dumped on the whitened border of the floor. On Saturday nights, when he had shaved and changed his shirt, Sparker had always lime-washed the border round his kitchen floor, making one or another of his three

patterns – plain, engrailed, or embattled – for he was a man of originality. Had he not invented that double kick which none could copy? There his pitcher was, its sunken water floating the still dust of empty months, on the yellowing border.

While I was making notes my friend Revvy came up to me and begging my pardon (O ever-courteous Revvy) asked me if I would like to write down the words of two songs he had heard Sparker sing sometimes.

'Many's the time ah've heard Zsparker zay that when'r were a boy he often didden have only a slice o' bread and lard all day. They wasn't so well off in they days as they be now, noomye!'

Shrove Tuesday Chant.

Lencrock a pancake
Fedder for my labour
I see by the string
There's a good old dame in
I see by the latch
There's something to catch
Nimmy nammy no
Trippy trappy toe
Please to give me something
And I'll be go.

He told me another, which ragged crowstarvers, twirling clappers and holloing across the fields, may have been shouting to one another when Shakespeare was alive.

Ploughboy's Chant.

Over to Pickwell
Mongst the trees
Barley bread
And vinned cheese
Reasty bacon
Tough as thong
Darned if I stop
There very long.

In another version, *thang* and *lang* were used. *Vinned* or *vinny* is green. A variation was the line *Sour cider much as you please.*

Just as I had written down these songs I heard a ow voice say, "Tes jonnick, that clock,' and I saw Mrs. Clibbit Kifft looking at my granfer clock. 'It went too high for me, but 'tis a gude thing all the same, for I've spent all me money twice over, I was so overtaken.'

I was glad to buy from her an elmwood box, about three feet long and two feet tall, with old wrought iron hinges and lock, for eighteen pence, the bidden price; and the smaller oak box in which Sparker kept his spoons, his marriage certificate, his rent book, and his money. The great-grandson and heir, who had ordered the sale, wanted to keep the key of the box 'for the sake of the old man', but I persuaded him to let me have it.

'They say you'm gettin' married soon,' said Mrs. Kifft, 'Be 'ee, surenuff? You wouldn't like to buy

that bed I bought, would 'ee?' She laughed, divining my thoughts.

'Aiy, tis' a monstrous great bed, surenuff,' the heir informed me in a whisper. 'Very heavy,' he said, staring down at his new black shoes, which probably he had bought on the strength of the auction. 'That was the trouble, between me and you,' he added confidentially. 'Else I should have kep' that bed for the sake of the old man.'

Those who did not know the cottage in the time I have written of would not, perhaps, find it easily in Stony Hill nowadays. It is still there, but it has, like its former occupant, moved with the times, which solves all things. The upper part of the wall, the cob, is gone, scattered as top-dressing over the glebe field. Rains have broken up the light brown lumps, unlocking, after centuries in darkness, the yellow blooms out of the charlock seeds.

The subsidy house has a new small stone wing added to it, covered with a modern rough-cast of cement, and roofed with blue slates. Charlie Tucker is pleased with his work; he gets forty-five pounds a year rent for his new house.

Larks and pipits still make their nests in the glebe field, and the summer wind shines in the grass.

1924

A BOY ON THE HEADLAND

A PATH along the North Side of the headland, trodden by bullocks in the furze and bracken, takes my young friend and me to the Point, with its 300-feet cliffs. Bluebells and primroses have seeded, the purple orchids and the dog-violets are nearly over, the white bladder-campion and the pink sea-thrift are now in full flower. The bumble bees know these flowery slopes below which grey gulls wheel and wail, and jackdaws float black as burnt straw-flakes above the blue-green waves. The bees bend the flowers, and fill their thigh-bags with pollen.

The boy with me is not interested in flowers. They are for later life, perhaps.

Those white things trembling on the hummock of sea-thrift are not flowers, but the feathers plucked by the peregrine falcon from a razorbill. Scramble down if you care to; I will sit here and breathe the wild-thyme wind, and watch the schooner so distant in the Severn Sea that it seems to be sailing in the sky. Probably you will find what remains of the razorbill's skeleton, picked clean by the hooked beak of the falcon. You will find neither

head nor feet nor legs; the head was knocked off by the impact of the falcon's stoop; the legs are in her crop. She has left only the sinew-linked wingbones and the notched breastbone. How do I know? I've seen it often before. That hummock is a favourite plucking place. For years the falcon has stood on that hummock; for years the thrift flowers have been marred where her feet press.

When you have toiled up the slope again, the bones pocketed for your museum, we follow one of the easier sheep-paths – for the rough-footed cattle do not roam out here – down to the colony of the herring gulls. The birds see us and utter their cries, half gabble and half wail. Yes, I have noticed that a gull floating in the sunshine is a lovely thing. How does it do it? It balances by leaning on the wind, its point of balance being in the centre of the breast. Hold out your arms and you will feel what I mean. Yes, it would be nice to have white feathers, and move *downwards and against* the air-flow, keeping at the same level, and so slowly. Yes, the pale yellow eyes have a pitiless look. The herring gull has no pity for any living thing. Why? I don't know.

I have seen a gull swallowing an entire nestful of young stone-chats in five gulps, and a young rabbit after them. If you examine that dry, clean casting on the ground, which one has ejected from his crop, and break it up, you will see what he has been eating. Small mussel shells, the bones of a

conger, a skull, and blue beetle wing-covers. You see, the gull is like the owl and the hawk and the heron in this – he swallows his food and the indigestible parts are cast up. That is a rat's skull. The rat was probably caught in a gin, and thrown aside by the trapper. Gulls are carrion eaters, like some men.

We reach the Point. If you must look over the precipice, for heaven's sake, and your mother's, go on your hands and knees. Then lie flat. The spaniel is wiser; he lies down twenty feet away. Once he chased a rabbit out of its form towards the edge, and stopped just in time. The rabbit fell over three hundred feet. The spaniel remembers. Did I get the rabbit? No, but the gulls did. Will its skull be there now? No. Why not? It was three years ago. It might be? And it might not be. Why? Well, why not?

Look! The peregrine falcons! The larger one soaring above is the female. It is unusual at this time to see both birds together. That shrill chattering cry is alarm, and anger. Ha! That gull alighted too near the eyrie. The falcon closed her wings and fell like an iron dart. Watch how she will make her point, swooping up by impetus on the wind. Look! She shoots up at nearly a hundred miles an hour. She will continue to glide in a circle five hundred feet above us, kept level by sudden beats of wings, until we have gone.

There is the raven! He is the old cock bird; he

has been sitting hunched on that knife-edged rock since we arrived. Yes, I heard the three low croaks of warning to the four young birds in the nest to keep still and stop their rattle. I think they must be the second brood – unusual, yes; perhaps the first eggs were taken by a collector. What, you'd like a young raven for a pet?

Well, if I were you, I wouldn't climb down to get one. But please yourself. The ravens have chosen a sheer face of rock for their heap of furze sticks lined with twigs and wool. I agree, it would be fine sport to return to school with a raven. I, too, have read *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. But weren't they jackdaws?

What, stop ragging, and be serious? I am perfectly serious. A sporting chance of climbing down, you say? Quick! The male peregrine, the tiercel, has swooped at the raven. The huddled old black bundle merely squints at him, along a pointed and poised beak, and the tiercel changes his mind. There is a story in the village of a raven that split a cat's skull with one blow of its beak. A very thick skull, too. However, don't let that deter you, if you really are keen about a raven for a pet. Will you climb down now, or shall we come back after tea, with a rope and an iron bar?

Yes, perhaps it would be kinder to leave the raven 'in the wild state.'

BILLY GOLDSWORTHY'S BARN

When first I came to live in the village I used to go to the sea at least once every day, and immediately after walking out of the drang or passage-way from my cottage to the roadway I passed a barn. It was built against the eastern wall of another cottage; the angular ridge of the sloping tiled roof lay out from, and below, a tottery brick chimney. After awhile I noticed a shrub growing out of the ridge, a small-leaved shrub, which later I learnt was a lauristinus. It grew in the middle of the ridge, and at first was not specially remarkable.

The first time I saw it, the shrub was no taller than a perching sparrow. It bore about a dozen leaves. A bird, perhaps, had carried up the seed, and lost it there; rain had sprouted the roots in a crevice of crumbling mortar between the ridge binders. In the dust of spiders' webs, swallows' droppings, and the rich frass of colonising wood-lice, the roots had found their food. How long would it last in that strange place, I wondered.

That summer was the driest within living memory. No rain fell for months, and yet the shrub growing

among the sun-baked tiles did not wilt. Day after day of unclouded heat of the high and brilliant sun; week after week of blinding sun-dust furiously and incessantly beating on all life, as though heaven would breathe flame into the very rock again. On the chimney tuns and walls of farmhouses and cottages the wall-rue and hart's-tongue ferns, and the pennywort and stonecrop – camels among plants – shrivelled brown as the brittle thatch. Only lichens held their forms and colours in the over-pressing sunlight – the lichens that were like mummies: and the green mysterious plant growing in solitude out of the red tiling.

The drought broke, and from the grazing fields, which for months had been hard and rough like cocoanut matting, there sprang the green loveliness of young grass. Beautifully the ferns uncurled in the mortar'd chimney tuns. The swallows on the ridge of the barn twittered as though it were spring again, and no autumnal farewell looming through the serene days of Little Summer. Soon, too soon, they were gone, and the damp, yellow leaves were falling from the churchyard elms; and the ferns were rusting, the fields lying grey and sodden in sea mists, the lanes but empty places along which to hasten in the afternoon walks – but haste was vain, for no immortal country, changeless in solitude dream of sunlight, was ever found over the next hill.

In that autumn and winter, when youth had not

learned the source of its illusions, and human love and friendship held only pain and bitterness, the little shrub growing so high and solitary in its evergreen sturdiness became more than a symbol of aspiration and endurance. Sometimes I saw it against the star-great winter sky, when Orion was lying bright over the elms. Once it was snow-clogged, and a hungry rook, watching the bare yard of Hole Farm opposite, huddled beside it. Year after year it remained there, a marvellous small tree serene in the burnt-clay desert of the barn roof.

One day in passing I stopped, thinking that I had never seen the doors of the barn open. They were drab and weather-worn, and secured by a rusty padlock of old pattern. Breaks in the ragged skirt were rudely patched with sheet-iron, or stopped with pieces of rock. Sometimes a small black and white cat was to be seen walking with slow, as if reluctant, steps in the long grass before the doors, squatting on the threshold to wash its face, and then, after harkening and flicking the tip of its tail, creeping under and disappearing. If one listened, one might hear a remote mewing, and the rustle of straw, and a blend of purring noises.

The wood of the upper part of the doors was almost hidden by bills stuck one on top of the other. Of all colours and types, the bills announced auctions, grass keep for sale, whist drives and socials and fêtes organised by political committees,

or for funds for the Church School, circuses, sales of boots and shirts and breeches and other cheap clothing. Occasionally, a religious text, with Love as the theme was found there, stuck upon the others. Youths on motor-cycles slung with canvas bags and iron paste-pots used to stop before the barn, give surreptitious glances over their shoulders, hastily paste up their business notices, and quickly ride away; but the religious texts must have been affixed at night, for no one in the village seemed to know who stuck them there.

Wasps flew to the doors in summer, to rasp the paper with their jaws, and carry it away to their nests. Children sometimes pulled off thick many-layered wads of the bills, which were cast away to litter the streets for days and sometimes weeks.

Passing late at night down the quiet village street, on my way to a haystack roost in the fields, I frequently heard the noises of knocking and thumping in the barn. Streaks of light shone through the chinks of the closed doors. Sometimes, instead of knocking, there would be the sound of low voices, but rarely after eleven o'clock.

I came to recognise the low and continuous flow of one voice; but the voice accompanying it, and usually vainly trying to over-ride it with laboured words, which were unable to pass easily off a tongue recently immersed in ale or cider, seemed to be different on each occasion. After I had passed the half-closed door about a score of times, three

voices, vain accompaniments to the continuous and dispassionate flow, became recognisable. One of them was the farmer of Hole Farm, who, I fancy, had come to complain, but had remained to argue.

The low-voiced man, I decided, was the owner of the barn, and, like all men, he did not like the expression of his ideas being thwarted; for one night, when the vain accompanying voice had raised itself almost to a shout in order to be heard, or perhaps to restore an ego's inner harmony, the knocking began vigorously, and shut down all words. The door was pulled open; a figure stumbled out and fell on the grass; picked itself up swearing; and shuffled away up the road, making uneven progress. Twenty yards farther on it halted, shuffled, spat, and yelled hoarsely, 'You'm a bliddy old vule, Billy Goldsworthy!' and shuffled on again.

A couple of nights later there was another discussion behind the closed and multi-papered doors; and this, too, ended abruptly, when a woman's voice cried with angry reproach from the lane, 'How much longer be 'ee going to bide there rattlin' away? I've got to be up to work early in the morning, and I want to be to bed some time to-night, even if you don't. 'Tes nothing but a parcel of ole flim-flam you both be telling, anyhow!'

I recognised the voice as belonging to a small middle-aged woman who passed by the barn several times every day, always carrying a rush-bag. She

would stop on her way to speak to puppies and children in low and friendly tones. Every year she walked more than a thousand times between her cottage at the west end of the village and the inn called the Lower House, always carrying a rush-bag with a bit of newspaper hiding the contents on the return journeys. Sympathy, tenderness, and understanding welled out of the plump little ageing body; and if she and her husband had rough words sometimes in their cottage, it was so inevitably, since the main trait of her nature was perpetually being stimulated and magnified at the expense of the rest of her being.

My curiosity about the owner of the barn was now active, and the next morning I asked my neighbour Revvy who it was.

''Tis Billy Goldsworthy,' said Revvy.

'Where does he live?'

'Down by Zeales. Funny chap, he be: proper old oyl (owl), he be, always working at night, when most volks be up auver.'

Up over was a regular village expression for being in bed.

One day I saw the left section of the double door wide open, and stepping through the grass and the nettles, I called out, 'Good morning!' There was no answer, and I peered in. The sun laid a bright parallelogram on the uneven floor littered with old straw and broken, worn, slates. Beyond, in shadow, I saw barrels, planks, posts, a ladder with rungs

fallen like teeth in old age, and many other wooden things, broken and hoarded.

The barn was a museum of things of old-time village life. On rusty nails driven into the dry cob wall hung a reed-shearing hook, and a reaping hook beside it. The shearing hook was more circular than the reaping hook, and of iron beaten flatter. Both blades were brittle and dark with rust. The wooden handles were riddled with worm-holes.

Near them were other thatchers' tools: the flat wooden mallet used for banging level ends of the reed-motts; a standing bittle, or small thatching step, with iron prongs curved like an otter's eye-teeth, for sticking into the thatch; leather knee guards; a shearing board. All were riddled, dusty, and draped with old slack cobwebs.

As I was looking round, the barn, lit by the doorway light, grew suddenly dimmer. A small man, whom I had often seen before, but never spoken to, stood there.

'Good morning,' he said guardedly, standing still.

'I was just looking at these relics of old times,' I explained, and added, 'I've no right to be here, and must apologise for——'

'You'm quite welcome,' he replied immediately.

'The thick cob walls keep it cool, don't they?'

'Ah, they can't build to-day like they built in the old times.'

'It's a fair size, too.'

'Ay. 'Twas a dancing barn when I was a boy. Many's the time I've a-zin young men and maids a-dancing in this yurr barn by lantern light. And it was proper dancing in they days, too.'

Before I could say anything he went on,

'Twadden like these days, you know, when they'm all up to the Institute night after night, all dressed up like young leddies, with jazz bands and all. There ba'nt no sense in volks to-day, that's my way of thinking.'

'But don't you think times are better now?'

'You'm quite right, zur,' he replied, unexpectedly. ''Tis an old barn, surenuff.' He added meditatively, 'Aiy, it be. Tidden like times be now, when things be different. A man had to work for his living in they days. Aiy, he did.' He began to gather some straw.

The floor was of lime-ash, and a broken hollow like a pig's trough lay across it. He noticed that I was looking at the break, and paused in the act of picking up the armful of straw.

'Now that was done by my father and his father avore'n, beating out corn with a dreshel. I've a-zin my father knacking all night, when I was a boy. Twadden like to-day, you know, they was hard times, and no mistake.' He put down the straw. 'Aiy, they was.'

He took down the dreshel and showed it to me. It consisted of two thick wooden sticks linked

together loosely. The longer length was the handle, four feet long. To one end a horn joint was lashed with raw hide strings fitting into grooves, to allow the leather thong attached to the horn joint to turn with the flail, or wooden striker. Thong and horn made together a universal joint: the dreshel was swung from left wrist and right elbow, so that the flail turned just above the floor and banged on the corn along its whole length at once. The flail was two feet long, and made of holly two inches thick.

'In they days volks was poor, and couldn't afford a floor of oak planks for the dreshing barns, so they had to have lime-ash. An oak floor was best, you see, to give a jump to the flail after every knock.'

He showed me a thing like a low wooden stretcher, which he said was a pig form.

''Tis many a pig I've seen killed on that one,' he said. ''Tis the proper way to kill a pig, too, none of this yurr modern stab and spill the blood all over the place. Why, my dear soul, men couldn't turn the pig up to-day! They ban't got the strength the old volks had. Noomye!'

I looked at Billy Goldsworthy. He was about sixty-five years old, small, lean, and long-armed. His nose was long on his thin face; his adam's apple large in his thin neck. He wore always the same kind of semi-starched, semi-grey linen collar and shirt-front, never quite clean and never quite dirty. 'A proper old oyl,' Revvy had said; and as he

stood before me he looked like an owl, but an unfledged owl, a nestling barn owl that blinks in some dim day-chinked tallat as it sways like a decrepit, moth-eaten, very ancient featherless bird. His long nose and blinking eyes, his slightly bowed legs, the quiet grey night-look about him, all these things were owl-like.

'No, it ban't like the old days to-day,' said Billy Goldsworthy.

He pointed to an unfamiliar wooden machine like a great beehive, and said it was a wimbling machine. It had seven square sieves of iron wire graduated in size, each size being numbered with tallies, or cuts, on the wooden frame. After the threshing by the flail, the corn and the doust were shovelled into the winnowing machine; and when the handle was turned berries and doust, or seed covers, were scattered in the confined whirlwind, until the whole grains found their way through the first sieve; the broken grains through the second; the 'charlick' (charlock) and dock and scabious seeds (if the binding of the sheaves had been careless) through the third sieve, and afterwards, to the crops of the chickens waiting outside the door.

By the winnowing machine lay a hand rake for combing the wads, or sheaves, set aside for thatching after they had been threshed and pitched. The best motts, or unbruised wheaten straws, only were used. He demonstrated how a wad was first bound

with a straw rope, and then tightened with a driff, or wedge of extra reed-mots: then it was pitched, or tapped on the floor, in order to get the cut ends of the motts tight and level. The pitched sheaf was then combed with the hand rake, whose wooden teeth pulled out the bent or loose motts. The reed was then ready for wetting under the fall of the stream, before being laid as thatch.

'There won't be any more reed laid to new houses again, unless it be for these yurr gentry's fancy houses, 'tis my way of thinking,' said Billy Goldsworthy. 'Apart from other things, you see, a man can't get his money back on reed. Why, 'tis nigh on a hundred pounds to thatch a farmhouse 'vore and back nowadays, and 'tis all gone again in twenty years. That's five per cent. depreciation for your money, and where's your money coming back by? That's how it is to-day. Modern, that's it.'

He blinked, and fell into a reverie.

'What's that?' I asked, pointing to a frame of iron, about a foot square, with cross bars like a drain, fixed on an ash pole with a double handle.

He came out of his reverie, and explained that it was an old-time stamper for threshing barley. The iron bars broke the brittle beards of the barley, which was then shovelled into the 'wimbling' machine, to be thrown about from sieve to sieve as the cumbrous engine revolved inside its wooden frame.

'Aiy, they was bad times in they old days,' said

the quiet little man, stooping to pick up his armful of straw, and laying it down as some thought itched within his mind.

He stared around his pile of old wood which he had been hoarding for nearly half a century. 'It don't seem right, nowadays, young men picking up three pound and more a week so easy, when you think what the old folk earned. To-day folk don't have no children, but in they days a man might have seven or eight childer, and bring home seven shillings and sixpence vor to feed them all on. My dear soul, I've a-zin men in the harvest field working fifteen or sixteen hours straight off, and the vrost showing through their leather belts the whole time, as they stooped behind the reaper to bind the sheaves! And get one shilling and threepence for it!'

'The frost through their belts?'

'Well, that's what us calls it hereabouts. 'Twas so hot, you see, that a man would sweat all the time. Yes, there was beer, for those that wanted it, but twadden all who might want beer. 'Twas small ale, and likely to give a man the guts-ache. Some used to like it, no doubt. My dear soul, men used to sweat when they worked in they days: tidden so to-day. Why, they do say that a man to Morte once drank two pecks of ale and two pecks of cider between sunrise and sunset, and could walk straight after it! That's only what I've heard my father tell, you know, but 'tis right enough, no

doubt. And 'a could'v drunk more if he'd a mind to – 'twas more in the house, you know. Tidden like these days, when the farmers won't give naught away!'

A peck was two gallons, carried to the harvest field in a hand keg, or firkin. Four pecks would be seventy-two pints.

'Yes, sir, a penny an hour was all they old people was paid. And if a man saved up enough to slap up a cottage, what ground could 'a get? Vor to put'n up on? My dear soul, the landlords wouldn't let a man buy a bit of land! Look at my place down to Zeales, by the stream! There's a nice muddy place, under water in the winter. That's what poor people had to put up with in they days! A poky li'l old place for volks to live in. Tidden right, zur!'

He bent down once more to collect the straw.

I wondered what was right in these days or they days; but I said, 'Surely labourers to-day don't earn three pounds a week?'

He stood up again promptly.

'One pound, twelve shilling, and sixpence you have to pay a man to-day,' he said. 'And what do 'ee get for it? Why, if it rains, they'm oomwards! 'Tis the same all over the country to-day. Look at these Trade Unions! Why, there ban't no sense in it! People don't know when they'm well off.'

I attempted a question about the difference between the wetness of muddy cottages and the

wetness of working in muddy fields, but I was caught up in a flow of words like the stream in flood. The monologue consisted of a sort of cold mincemeat of talk, that had been cooked many times already; a mince of what he had read in newspapers, heard at political addresses, and reluctantly absorbed from more persistent orators in his barn. Sometimes I put in a word or a sentence into the flow, when he would most unexpectedly pause, stare at the ground, say, 'Yes, zur,' as though in profound meditation (but really in politeness), and then he would start again, gradually working up to a rapid rant.

For more than an hour, while the swallows sped over the barn and the furze-grown wall of Hole Farm opposite, the monotonous flow ran on, washing and rattling around the stones and rusty tins and sherds and rags of Unequal Ownership of Land, Rates and Taxes, Money, Artificial Silk Stockings for Village Maids who thought only of Dancing, Parish Roads, the Scandal of the Sewer, the Scandal of the New Cemetery. No more mental nourishment in his words or ideas than there was use in the things thrown away in the stream by the village people.

At last the tax-collector, Charlie Tucker, passed by, and stopped to give us each a demand note for the rates of the last half-year. Bill Goldsworthy stooped down to gather up his straw, but——

'Now just look at this,' he exclaimed, laying down his armful of straw again. 'Five shilling and eightpence in the pound! And for what exactly be you and me paying it? Do us get any benefit for our money? Five shilling and eightpence in the pound!'

Laboriously he read out the items in the demand note.

General Expenses of the Rural District Council (including Highways), 1*s.* 9*d.*

'And did you ever see the roads in such a dirty state? Now just look at all that grass and weeds by the roadside. They'm supposed to have all that cleaned up, and look at it! That's what us be paying for, my dear soul! Modern! that's what it is.'

County Police and Education Rates County Contribution, 2*s.* 4*d.*

'What be the good of all the education children be getting to-day? The old volks could neither read nor write, and were better off like that, too. And to-day the young volks be above themselves, and won't do this, and won't do that, and are all for this yurr jazz dancing and pleasure. Aiy, they be.'

Expenses of Overseers, including voids and balance, 6*d.*

'That's what us have to pay for to have our money taken from us!'

'What's this next item?' I asked him.

Expenses (other than under Adoptive Acts) of Parish

Council or (where no Parish Council) of Parish Meeting, 2d.

'Ah,' said Billy Goldsworthy, like one who had waited long for that moment.

Deliberately he stuck a pitchfork, its handle scarred and brittle with age, into the bundle of straw-bedding for his cows that he had come to fetch about an hour and a half previously. He lifted it waist-high, then put it down again.

I realised that his silent action was meant to express his full feelings about that twopence.

I waited. Billy Goldsworthy stared at me with a knowing expression on his face. No, he was not like an owl; his face was like that of a slow-worm, greyish, with little eyes.

I waited. He blinked.

'So you want to know the truth about that item, you say?'

I waited. This man did not know what words meant.

'Well, shall I tell 'ee?'

He put the pick carefully by the wall.

I waited.

No, not a slow-worm: he was a toad-stool in a wide cloth cap. A blinking toad-stool.

He gathered the straw on the pick, and hoisted it on his shoulder. 'Ha, Ha! *Modern*, that's what it is to-day, everywhere!'

I waited, and I waited.

He laid down the straw again.

'Us calls that Clitter Clatter Rate,' he said at last. 'That's what us has to pay for the talk in the Parish Council. 'Tis this yurr New Cemetery; and if tidden wan thing, 'tis another. And it be your and my money that has to pay for it. Aiy, it be.'

Once again he hoisted the straw, and moved towards his rotten, paper-tattered doors.

'A good expression, *Clitter Clatter*,' I snarled. 'It just expresses all the unknowledgeable rant and rubbish and superficial spate of words that wimbles and wambles on and on for ever in this village, particularly at night. Nothing but parcels and parcels of old flim-flam.'

'You'm right,' said Billy Goldsworthy, smiling: and yes, he put down the straw again!

'You'm just about right! That's how it is everywhere to-day! Tidden like the old times, noomye!'

Then he picked up the straw. Then he moved into the sunshine, blinking towards the roof. Then he put down the straw again.

'Ah, I'd almost forgot that there shrub. I've been meaning to do it for some time now, only I've always been so busy.'

He opened the door again, and the imperturbable life of the little roof tree was a mystery no longer. For I saw, against the cob wall, the crooked and wandering greyish stem of a shrub that had pushed under the eaves by the farther wall, and, climbing to the rafters, had found a way to the light through the ridge. The shrub had its roots

in the garden of Thunderbolt Carter whose cottage was hidden behind the barn.

'The dark green leaves look rather pretty up there: can't you leave it to grow?'

'Ah, but 'tis growing out of another man's garden, you see,' he replied. 'And has no right to be on my property. By rights he should have cut it himself; but us'll say naught 'bout that. You can't do what you like with another man's property, you know! Noómye, tidden right. What if it breaks my tiles abroad? You've got to look out for yourself to-day, for no one else will if you don't, will they?'

He took a rusty billhook from a nail in the wall.

'I think it looks nice up there,' I mumbled. 'And it's hardly grown all these years. It won't break your tiles.'

'Ah, but tidden right that another man's tree should grow otherwise than on his own property, do you see?'

So saying, he hacked the straying trunk of the shrub that had no proper sense of the rights of property.

'Aiy,' he said, moving away. 'And it's the Same Thing Everywhere throughout the Country to-day, you'll find. There's not the sense in volks now as there used to be, that's my way of thinking. Now just take these yurr Trade Unions——.'

From the window of my writing room I watched him walking away up the road in his quiet, inoffensive shamble, veering slightly out of his line

towards the docks and grasses growing by the wayside, to pluck with his free hand at the seed-heads, but reluctantly, for another man had been paid to remove them.

THE GAPING RAVEN OF MORTE

Not far from the Morte there are broken cliffs and awful precipices, and as you creep on hands and knees to the edge (while in fear your spaniel whines and crouches ten yards away) the roar of the sea increases, and you are looking down – two, three, four hundred feet to the pools and rocks below.

Jackdaws slip from their nests in the holes of the ledges, among the white sea-campion and the sturdier pink thrift, and cry *ker-jack*, *ker-jack*, *jank*, *jank!* But long before they give the alarm, the Gaping Raven has called softly and in a deep voice like a strong, sober man swearing when he breaks a bootlace, *krok-krok-krok*. Three throaty croaks, and his mate flaps from her nest of sticks and branches of furze, when you are two hundred yards away.

The Gaping Raven is old. He has nested in that dangerous place for scores of years. Probably he believes himself to be immortal. The upper and lower mandibles of his beak are always open, like a washerwoman's clothes-peg. During the months of nesting he perches – when not seeking his food of

beetles, daws' eggs, young rabbits, and carrion – on the top of the precipice among the stunted bluebells and the sparse bracken, preening and meditating, watching.

He sits on a little knoll which gives a field of view upon all approaches, and scratches with the claws of his knobbed feet. His head is nearly bald and his skin is black and wrinkled like pitch in the sun. He scratches scores of times in the hour and shakes his plumage, which looks like a fly-blown black boa thrown away on Hampstead Heath on Bank Holiday night. I shouldn't be surprised if I were told that he hadn't been inside an egg for a century.

And always that malevolent gape. Yesterday I climbed to a ledge whence a view of the nest could be seen, and the old bird and his mate flew near me, their feathers glinting shiny-purple in the sun. They dived at the jackdaws, and when a kestrel-hawk – dainty, slender windhover with large brown eye, red-brown back, and grey poll – came to its eyrie near, they bullied it away, screaming in rage and fear.

On the ledge I found one of the Gaping Raven's pinion feathers, and it smelt rank and musty. I found also the furry skeletons of many rabbits, all the bones nicked by the powerful beaks. There were rat skulls as well, and the headless remains of sea-birds – they had picked these up on the tide line, birds whose heads had been knocked off by the stoop of peregrine falcons.

The fledgings in the nest croaked to their parents for food, heedless of the warning to crouch low and keep silent. Not liking the ledge at all, since it was one hundred and fifty feet to the rocks below, and most of the hand-clutches and footholds were loosely embedded flakes and therefore treacherous, I climbed up again and made my kettle-fire in a cove about three hundred yards up the coast. While I sat there afterwards, smoking, my companion yelled to me in his boyish excitement to observe something in the sky.

I looked up and saw the Gaping Raven with some immense thing in its beak. High above him a peregrine falcon was anchored in the wind, and even as I watched it dropped like a black anchor-head of iron, making its point at the raven. The plunder was immediately dropped and, uttering an oath of rage or boredom, the raven prepared to arrest the plunge with the twin spears of his beak.

As usual, the fight ended in a draw; but what I am so eager to impart to you is this: the plunder fell with a clash and clang on the rocks, and scrambling to it, we picked up a young rabbit in a gin, or steel trap, with chain attached, the load weighing about three pounds.

1922

SCRIDDICKS

In several Devon villages, during the period of ten years after the Great War covered by my book, I have heard and seen many things which interested me. Some were made immediately into stories, rapidly written while the impressions remained unworn by later and different thought. *The Badger Dig* and *The Ackymals* were two written immediately after the actual happenings. Many, however, were written some time afterwards; some have been left overlong until the desire to write – which always must first break through an indolence and distaste for writing – has gone. Those sketches which were not written spontaneously were written afterwards from the notes I made in various places; and looking over the pages of the note-books, the envelopes, the match-boxes, the letters and odd bits of paper on which they were jotted down, I see that many of the entries are short stories already – stories which are truly short. I have now grouped these scriddicks, or fragments, under various headings which reveal, to me and perhaps to some other readers, what has actually been thought and said and done somewhere in the West Country. For convenience, I have used the old

name of the village which I knew best of all – Ham. It would be as well to state here that 'The village of Ham' does not exist in the world of reality, nor are any of the human and other beings described in it necessarily real beings. For instance, the parson who buried the baby is not the parson who handed out tracts during the snow of 1929, nor is the tractiferous parson the man who preached against 'the evils of idle gossip.' To go further along the narrow way of precision, I cannot truthfully declare than any baby was buried, that any tract was awarded, that any sermon was preached, in the manner I have written: I can only say that certain sensuory effects of these things were made on my consciousness at certain times, like seals in wax; and in the Village Book are the impressions of village life as they have been made on me. It would be true to affirm only one thing: that it indicates the mind of one villager, as revealed in his attitude towards his neighbours. For all gossip is a boomerang; the gossip-maker judges himself, indicating his own quality. But this has been expressed in literature more concisely in the epigram 'Judge not that ye be not judged,' which some people in the village of Ham seem to think is only a superior version of the more homely expression 'Tit for Tat.' Here are some other

RELIGIOUS AND SUPERNATURAL BELIEFS

2. During one week five men died. The eldest

of them was ninety-four, the youngest was seventy-six years old. On the following Sunday the parson preached a sermon about this, declaring in his solemn and condescending voice that it was 'a direct warning from God about the shortness of our life here below.'

3. The same parson, unable to bear the sight of men tobogganning and sliding down the snow slopes of the hill behind his vicarage, one Sunday afternoon, during the great frost of January, 1929, left his fireside, and trudged up the hill to address the laughing, shouting, merry group. Controlling his agitation, he suggested that 'Our Lord made the seventh day as a Day of Rest.' One man replied, 'Us be working men, zur, and don't get much time on week-days.' The parson pursed his lips, waited, and declared: 'Very well, men, I warn you that you are heading straight for destruction.' At which an old man with a beard, who had been sliding down on a rusty tea-tray with his grandson, replied quite seriously, ''Tes all right, zur, thanking 'ee kindly, but the hill ban't so steep as it looks, and us can easily slow up at the bottom. I've just been down myself, zur, and 'tes quite safe, zur. Thanking you all the same, zur.'

4. The wife of a rich farmer and landowner, a devout member of the Wesleyan Chapel, who spoke seldom to others in the village, and whose lips

moved with the least movement in returning a good morning, found that her sugar jar was empty one Sunday afternoon. She went down to the grocer's shop, and asked the grocer's wife if she minded serving her on the Sabbath.

'Of course I won't pay now, as it is the Sabbath.'

'No, I don't object, ma'am,' replied the grocer's wife, as she unlocked the back door of the shop. 'Us don't make a practice of Sunday selling, but to oblige anyone, do them a good turn if they'm caught on the hop, like then us don't mind. How much sugar would you be wanting, please?'

When it was weighed, packed up, and handed over the religious woman said, 'Well, the Lord will pay, as it is the Sabbath Mrs. Brooking.' She added 'But even so, the scales have been used on the Day of Rest, Mrs. Brooking.' She stared intently at the blue packet in her hands. 'It would be better to seek divine forgiveness, Mrs. Brooking.' As she went out of the side entrance, 'Yes, when I get home, Mrs. Brooking, I will offer up a prayer – for you, Mrs. Brooking.'

5. I have heard it said that there is a ghost on the sands of the wide bay west of the village – the ghost of Cap'n 'Arry, who rides headless on a white horse when the south-west gale sweeps the dry top sand in long skeins aslant the seaweed-ribbon of the shore. Old Muggy told me that in his kid

days men would come into his father's inn at Cryde, wide-eyed and out of breath, having run most of the way from the dreaded apparition.

Cap'n 'Arry, he told me, was the skipper of a bark wrecked on the Morte Stone, lured there in the darkness by a lanthorn tied to the horn of a cow tethered on the grassy slopes of the Morte, to give false hope of safe anchorage. The skipper was the only man to survive the pound of the breakers on the sands. Seeing the dumb movements of the sailor's lips as the sea washed back from his sodden body, the farmer's wife – the barton, or farm, was the only building standing above the sandhills in those days – held his head under water between the prongs of a dung-fork; and in due course those pieces of the ship's furniture which had not been smashed on the rocks were added to the collection in the farm-house.

The skipper's wife travelled down from Scotland by coach, and there was a fuss-up over the furniture, which ended in a curse.

'Yes, sir, the curse came true as I'm sitting here,' declared Muggy, in his corner seat under the clock in the Higher House. 'Bad days came to the farmer. The farmer died. Yes, sir. The wife moved to Cryde, and became mazed wandering.' Muggy declared, on the authority of his grandfather, who owned the inn to Cryde in they days, that whenever boys threw a handful of sand into her cottage kitchen through the open door, she would turn head over

heels. The same thing happened when she went into the pub for a glass of beer, and trod on the sanded floor. He was a kid in they days, and saw her turn upsydown. Yes, sir. During one of those falls she died, and in the chapel there were thunderous words from the pulpit about the vengeance of the Lord.

To-day, when print goes nearly everywhere, and the coral reef of human thought is being raised quicker than ever before, it is easy to imagine how the poignancy of a fixed idea, multi-barbed by every glance and word of religious neighbours and the incessant jeers of children, destroyed the woman's brain.

The White Witch.

A friend of mine, a doctor, told me about a white witch in his village who could cure warts. 'It's an absolute fact,' he said. 'General Dashel sent his daughter to me to be cured; but the warts kept recurring. At last she went to Jimmy Chugg, the white witch, a harmless old fellow who lived alone in his cottage. "Don't think naught more about it, midear," said Jimmy Chugg. "In three weeks you won't be bothered no more. Figseye! Figseye!! Figseye!!!" And in three weeks the warts were gone. It's a fact.'

'How does he do it?' I asked.

The doctor did not know; nor did he know the origin of the incantation, unless it was a corruption of *pig's-eye*.

Here are the white witch's incantations, with the authentic spelling, handed down during how many centuries,

For White Swelling.

As our Blessed Lord can cure all manar of deseases, of a white ill thing, a red ill thing, a black ill thing, a rotted ill thing, an haking ill thing, a cold clapping ill thing, a hot preaking (ill thing), a bizzing ill thing, a sticking ill thing, let all drop from thy face, thy head, thy fleash unto the earth in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

A Charm for Ringworms.

Pray God bless thy flesh and save bone and destroy the ringworm that are thereon. If the Lord please to remove them, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost Amen.

Blessing for Hurden Hill.

Good Lord, keep this cow from evil, for thine is the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory, for ever and ever, Amen.

I discovered that Hurden Hill meant Udder Ill: a more modern cure for which is advertised every week in the local paper, with the photograph of the rear of a cow, with four arrows pointing at an overplussed milk supply and the words 'Something like a Bag.' This photograph, repeated week after week, always produces a feeling of humiliation in me.

For Sprain.

Christ Himself rode over a bridge. The horse sponge. He onlight his joints. He wrestled His sinney to sinney, vain to vain. Pray God to deliver thee out of this pain. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

For Pearl (?cataract).

The son of Arthless had a pearl upon his eye, and he prayed unto the Lord Jesus Christ that pearl might fall from his eye, so I pray it may fall from thine eye to the earth. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, bless the eye of Mary Ann, if it be a black kenning, a white kenning, a red kenning, stinging, aching, pricking, or stabbing, let it fall from thy eye, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

For a Blackthorn.

Our loving Christ's blood was sprinkled among thorns. If the Lord please, the thorn may not fuster nor prick nor rot, but that it may be whole again. If the Lord please. Amen.

For a Kenning (probably a boil or stye on eyelid).

If this shall be a Kenning or perl. If it be white, read, or black, if the Lord be pleased to ease the pain and save the sight of A. B. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

For Longcripple Ting (Viper's 'sting,' or bite.)

Our Blessd Virgin Mary Sot and Soad
her Blessd babe sot and Plead their
Came a Ting worm out of eldern wood
He ting our Blessd Savour by the foot his
Blader Blew and never bruk (broke) so shall
A. B. (name)
Break – A. B. – Tong Ting and Ring Ting in
In the name of the Father
Expel thy Ting.

Blessing for Strain.

As Christ was riding over Crosby bridge A. B. (the person sick) his leg he took and blessed it, and said these words, bones to bones and sincues to sincues, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

For a Whitethorn.

As our Blessd Lord and Saviour His flesh was pricked with thorns he did not canker nor rust no more neather (?never) shant thin A. B. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

Stenten Blood (?Staunching).

As our Blessd Lord and Saviour went down into the river Jordan to be baptised and the water was vile and hard, our Lord Jesus was mild and good he laid his hand and it stood so, and so shall thy Issue of thy blood A. B. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

For Warts.

The witch repeats *Fig's-eye* thrice, and laughs. He tells you that he mustn't take money for his cures, but he may receive payment in kind if you really wish it.

A man of serene temperament, going about his day's work quietly. He invited the doctor and myself to be present with himself at a pig-killing, when, he said, he would staunch the blood, after the stabbing, without going near the animal. 'No one can kill a pig unless I say so,' he smiled. I intended to go and see him do it; but the months and years went by and we three did not happen to come together at a pig-killing. Now the white witch is dead, and I shall never know his secret.

The Seventh Son.

I know another curer of warts. He is a seventh son; a small, quiet little man with a black patch over one eye, living with his wife in a detached cottage behind Stony Hill, at the curve of a lesser lane. As unobtrusively as an owl in a hollow tree he lives there; regularly he goes down to the sands to collect sticks for firing. Somebody told me he could cure warts. 'He cuts a twig out of the hedge when no one be looking, and speaks to the twig.' I asked him if he could cure warts, and he said, Yes, he could. 'Would he tell me how he did it?' He was sorry, he was not allowed to tell: but he could cure warts, and took no money for it. Then

quietly he passed on down the lane, and although I want to learn how he came by his serene belief, I shall not know.

The Black Witch.

A butcher in Crosstree village told me about a woman called Witchy Mock, once living in Town. Her landlord, being apparently uneasy about her powers, gave her notice one Michaelmas quarter-day, to quit at the following Christmas quarter. She ill-wished him. He would not live to see the New Year, declared Witchy Mock.

Towards Christmas the man fell ill. 'I told him he would,' said Witchy Mock. 'But he won't die until New Year's Eve.' The man grew worse. The doctor was called in. On New Year's Eve the man's wife and family were whispering and sobbing round his bed. Just after midnight, when the bells of Pilton and St. Mary's were echoing down the street and over the mists of the river, Witchy Mock came out of her house and said to a group of people at the street corner, 'I've forgive him now.' She went back into her unlighted house, and soon afterwards they heard that the man had died when he had heard the bells announcing the New Year.

'Overlooked.'

A farmer who used to spend money in jovial hours in the inns gradually became less outspoken, and sallow about the eyes. He took to drinking

whiskey where before he had taken only beer. His hens wouldn't lay, his cattle broke down his neighbours' banks, his sheep had foot-rot, his well ran dry (when many others also ran dry: but no, his well had run dry for another reason). One stormy night his chimney fell down; ferns had been growing between the cracks in the mortar for years. He was a yeoman farmer, owning two hundred acres, with first and second mortgages on them. His farmhouse stood behind a neglected orchard at the edge of a swamp. The plaster was fallen in patches, and the outside walls had not been lime-washed for many years. He was always behind with his work; sometimes his fields were left unsown owing to the tardy ploughing. A cow slipped in the lane, broke its leg, and had to be destroyed. Along one of his banks mulleins used to grow, tall plants of summer with towers of yellow blooms like primroses. They grew too sparsely to be called weeds, a sort of distinctive wild hollyhock. One day I saw the farmer walking idly down the hedge, leaving the brambles which had grown out and rooted in the field, and striking at the tall stalks of the mulleins. He talked with me for more than an hour, and his talk was all of his ill-luck and bad fortune, until finally he told me what was the trouble. He had been overlooked. 'There was no way of getting away from facts – I be overlooked.'

The farm, where his forebears had worked hard for two hundred years, was sold. When I saw him

last he was outside the office of the Ministry of Labour, waiting to draw the unemployment dole. He was thin, shabby, sallow. Until he died I knew he would believe that his ill-luck was due to his having been witched.

Mrs. Brooking's sister: the farmer's crippled child.

Many of the older and middle-aged people in the village believe in the power of witches. In two cases I had opportunities of penetrating to the origin of at least one woman's belief. She had a sister who was witched by a gipsy, who tried to sell her a broom and was rebuffed. The gipsies have a permanent colony near the moor, and spend their lives going from village to village trying to sell mats, brushes, etc., at a price much greater than need be paid in the town shops. They walk slowly from house to house, and are very persistent in a sort of wheedling persuasion, once they have been allowed to get a foot on the opened threshold. Their faces are a golden brown, and some of the young women are beautiful and strong, with yellow hair in thick coiled plaits like ears of wheat about their ears. Their dress is distinctive. The men wear dark suits of thick material with the high lapels of last century's fashions to their coats, buttoning them against the driven rain of the high moor, and trousers with bell-bottoms. The women wear high brown boots, high bosom'd corsets, and high hats with black and purple colours prevailing.

One of these gipsy women tried to sell a broom to Mrs. Brooking's sister, and was told to go away. The gipsy became angry, and cursed her. 'At sunset you will find rue from me, as you go in this very door, and you won't move a finger until dark,' said the gipsy. Mrs. Brooking told me, 'At sunset, sure enough, my sister came in from the garden: and over the threshold she seemed to stiffen, and she gasped out, 'I can't move, Mary. The gipsy!' and sure enough, she had to be laid on a bed, and 'a didden move a finger until the night sky was as black as your hat.'

I had no hat in those days: however, the simile was usual in the village.

Mrs. Brooking is truthful, or rather, she says what she believes and has heard. After she had told me the above, she said, 'And I tell you who else was ill-wished, too. And that is Farmer Riddaway's daughter. Her was ill-wished from birth, poor maid. And ever since her's been a cripple, just sitting by the fire all day, and can't even feed herself. And I'll tell you who ill-wished'n. 'Twas the maid Farmer Riddaway courted before he courted another, who became his wife. Us all knawed it yurr in the parish.'

Having heard, from one of the gentry, another reason given for the crippled state of the farmer's daughter – the 'sins of the fathers' – I went to the farmer, not without a certain reluctance, and asked why his daughter was a cripple. 'Yes, I'll

tell 'ee,' he said. 'You'm a father, and you'll understand. My wife was taken in labour on the 28th of March, and her wasn't delivered until the 2nd of April. And a wouldn't let the doctor use th' instruments, for a knowed it would have killed the chiel. The baby's head was too big to be born, you see. And from the 28th of March to the 2nd of April – five days – the mother was in agonies of pain downabout. You'm a married man and a father, else I wouldn't be telling 'ee this. And when at last the poor little chiel was born, why, 'twas almost no life in it at all. That's why my li'l maid be a cripple, and can't tend for hersel': but her's got all her faculties, you know. Some say otherwise, but tidden true, midear, tidden true!'

Then I asked him if he knew anything about the sister of Mrs. Brooking; and he replied 'Yes, her's had fits since her was a little maid. Some used to say her was ill-wished by a gipsy, but tidden no truth in it: her was like it before, and her's been like it since.'

Medical Beliefs.

Children coughing, retching, and spitting in front of my gate, looking at the little boy learning to walk, May 1927.

I suggest, in my paternal anxiety, that they should go away, as they have the whooping cough.

'Us bain't got whoopin' cough,' says Madge Carter, with an edge of hostility in her voice.

I see her mother looking out of her little white face.

'Anyhow,' declares Mrs. Willy Gammon, hurrying on her way back to her numerous small family, after her morning work in the boarding-house up the road, 'It's the best time to have it in the May month,' and she hastens on without pausing, scornful of the young parents who are so concerned about their one baby. All this fuss about window-opening at night, and letting the child walk about in the sun without any clothes. Let them have fourteen like she'd had to put up with, then they'd soon learn not to worry so.

Mechanical Belief.

There is a man in the village who puts a bucket of water under the front axle of his car in cold weather, to stop the frost 'getting at his radiator.'

Ham's opinion of London.

Billy Goldsworthy went up to London for the first time in his life, at the age of fifty-four, and stayed in a private hotel opposite Paddington Station. When he returned, black-suited and bowler-hatted, he said, 'I didden care much for Lunnon. I slepp in a house by the station, and couldden get a wink of sleep with everything going wip and pop all night.'

FLIGHT OF THE FALCON

I AM lying on the sward at the lip of the precipice, three hundred feet above the Atlantic. A strong north-west wind is blowing, making broad streaks on the sea. Innumerable pink flowers of thrift are shaking on their stalks beside and behind me. The stone wall, a hundred yards away, keeping the wind from the first field of the headland, is pink along its length, where the gales have blown the thrift seeds of other years. I can smell wild thyme. The coast of Wales lies to the north, and the Dartmoor hills to the south. But these things I do not heed; I am waiting in subdued excitement for the sight of the falcons.

Far below, in the cove of rocks and boulders (exposed at low tide), a man is clambering slowly. He is going to shout under the cave called Bag Hole. The cave is about eighty feet high, and at the top of it, unseen by me, is the eyrie of the peregrine falcons – a ledge used by peregrines for centuries, and robbed every spring when falconry was a regular sport.

I watch the tiny human figure reach the last rock before the sand, and jump off. One with its

shadow it moves towards the vast sheer face of the Long Rock – on the narrow top of which, amid yellow lichens and white feathers and dark green clumps of sea-thrift, the herring gulls are sitting on their nests.

I hear the shout of my friend, and immediately a bird with dark blue pointed wings shoots out a hundred feet below me, sweeps up into the wind without a tremor, and cuts a wide circle over the sea and the rocks. It glides level with my eyes. As it glides straight, it seems into my glasses, I see that the wings are slightly downheld, but each wing is straight. It is the falcon, or female. Her sturdy body gives her a short-winged appearance, like a fighting scout airplane with covered fuselage.

The wings flicker nervously, they cease, and she glides a hundred yards; flicker again, for ten beats, then gliding fifty yards, she cries in a harsh shrill chatter, *aik-aik-aik!* Gulls are floating in the deep wind-swirled hollow in the cliffs, but she passes them in her level gliding. One gull flies after her, with open beak and hasty beating grey wings; the shorter blue wings flicker like a dark star twinkling, and the gull is left behind. *Aik-aik-aik!* The tiercel, her mate, smaller by a tierce or third, has arrived. He cuts through the air three hundred feet over my head, suddenly tipping sideways and falling with half-closed wings. As always, the speed of his stoop excites and amazes me. Then the grand swoop

up again, shooting upwards fifty feet in less than a second. A beautiful curve!

The tiercel glides past his mate, and down a slight incline, faster and faster, never a wingbeat, reaching the headland's point, a thousand feet away, in about ten seconds, swooping up again to be over the raven who has casually launched itself off the jut of rock whence it has been watching me, then turning into the wind and rising to the size of a small star. And with never a wing-beat he cuts his spirals and circles, his loops and lines and paraboles. *Aik-aik-aik!* in the wailing and yakker of the gulls whose young are standing in the nests of grass and seaweed on the ledges below me, little things speckled as with sun and shade. The falcon, as she tirelessly circles, cries her distress, for she is brooding her three rusty-red eggs in the ancient eyrie – the rocky ledge worn smooth with the feet of eyases and the brittle spinning of bones during how many hundreds or thousands of summers and winters of the past? *Aik-aik-aik*! Hatching time is very soon. Tap-tip-tap has been coming from one egg since the morning, and they must not grow cold.

Thinking of my little babe asleep in his cot (he should be asleep, it being past six o'clock!) I cap my pen and close my note-book, and get up, while the spaniel, who has been lying, patient and uneasy, twelve yards away from the precipice, bounds up with joy. Walkees! Rabbits!

THE ACKYMALS

One full-summer afternoon, following a stormy night, when the shadows of the walls and thatch lay sharply on the drying road, a shot rang out in the hollow of the village, and a little boy walking in the shade past the nettles growing out of the wall of Hole Farm, stopped, and said to himself, 'Coo! I bet that one knacked'n vlying!'

'Hullo, Ernie,' I called from my window, glad of any excuse to leave my desk. 'What's been knocked flying?'

''Tis Janny Kift shooting th'ackymals on his pays!'

I ran out of the room, and down the steps to the road, crying, 'So that is what has been startling my baby, day after day! Why does that fool want to shoot tomtits? They don't eat peas. They eat insects on the peas. Poor little tomtits. Would you shoot an ackymal, Ernie?'

'I ain't got no gun,' murmured Ernie.

'That's why the eleven nestlings in the hole in my garden wall died this spring! He shot the old birds.'

'When Janny Kift finds an ackymal's nestie, he

blocks'n up if he can't tear'n out. Father see'd'n doing it. Be 'ee gwin to the funeral?'

'What funeral, Ernie?'

'They be gwin to bury a babby up to churchyard this afternoon. I be gwin. Be you gwin?'

When he is quiet, Ernie's face has an expression that rests in beauty; his brown eyes brim with a sweet and gentle luminousness, as though a spirit were looking forth from the eyes of a child.

'Us be gwin,' said Ernie.

I remembered hearing about the baby. Four days before, a treble toll of the bell in the church tower had brought the cottage wives to their doors. After an interval, a single toll; and the women had waited, to learn the age of the dead child. The bell was silent. One year old! Then Mrs. Ridd's babby were dead, poor li'l mite.

The swallows were twittering over the village street, and the martins were busy with their late brood in the nest over the door of Hole Farm. The black and white droppings, remains of thousands of flies, splashed the wall, and the sett-stones under, every year, for the farmer 'liked seeing the birds about.' No, I was not going to the funeral.

Ernie knew all about death, although probably he had forgotten what he had told me three years before, when he was four. Graves he called pits. Before burial, dead men 'had a good tea first, and then they take their boots off and put them in pits. They can't see nobody any more when they be in

the pits, because the earth be in their eyes.' I remembered asking him, trying to probe the child-mind, how he would like to be buried; but he had shaken his head, saying he 'would never go into a pit, because he can't never die.' Asked how he knew that, Ernie said, 'Jesus said so,' and told me that it was in Sunday School. Later, his mother had told me that Ernie had been shown a biblical picture of the disciples walking through a cornfield, shod with sandals, and eating corn; and this had made the above impression on his mind.

The Lower House stood at the top of the street which formed the upper horn of the spur-shaped village. Passing the carpenter's cottage and shed, with its large enamelled iron Navy Recruiting advertisement, lime-washed after the War with the rest of the wall, I reached the sunken thatched cottage where John Kift lived. 'Plaise to come right in, midear,' invited Mrs. John Kift, an elderly plump woman, dressed in black clothes smelling of moth-ball. 'Mind 'ee don't brish against they walls; they'm spotty as a leper. 'Tis the damp, zur. No matter what be done, they walls remain spotty as a leper!' I stepped down into a damp, dark passage, and into a darker living room, lit by a small square window. A percussion-cap single-barrel gun was laid on two rusty nails driven into the great oaken beam crossing the smoky ceiling; the beam, as in all the cottages, had been lime-washed. I noticed photographs on the high chimney piece, and bunches

of herbs drying along the beam; and then I heard the craking voice of John Kift calling me from the end of the passage.

At the passage-end were sheds, cluttered with old gins, and pails, and shovels, and boxes; bedsteads, bicycle frames and wheels, pea-sticks, and barrels. Rust had worn away the iron lying there, the death-watch beetle – the 'worm' of the countryman – had bored the wooden supports and rafters. Cobwebs, loaded with the frass of the boring insects, and with mummied moths and flies and wasps, filled the upper spaces of the sheds. John Kift stood beside a box with a wire-net front, behind the webs of which a ferret was moving, trying to get out.

'You shoot ackymals, don't you?' I asked.

'Aiy aiy!' he cried. 'Every wan I zee near my pays! I load me gun with a half-charge, and blow ivry wan of the li'l beggars abroad! Seventy-eight I've shute this year, and in the spring my son blocked up half-a-dizen nesties in holes in walls roundabout.' His voice grew louder and louder. 'Yes, zur! And if us didden do that, us wouldn't have a pay left, noomye!'

'But ackymals eat insects,' I protested.

'And pays as well! Yes, zur! They be master birds for pays, the rogues! But this one won't ate no more pays.' And with the toe of his boot he kicked a tiny bundle of feathers lying on the ground. I picked it up. Half its feathers were blown off its breast, its legs broken, its eyes filmy in its loose

and backward-rolling head. Its neck and head were a deep black – a marsh tit, weighing, perhaps, half an ounce.

John Kift took me to the rows of peas and showed me pods three inches long, with ragged tears along the lengths of shucks, as though rats had gnawn them. 'Knack, knack, knack, the li'l hellers go on them, and I'll shute ivry wan I zee!'

Four kinds of titmice were lying on the ground under the peas – great, blue, coal, and marsh. I knew that great-tits and blue-tits could chip and hack expertly with their strong beaks – the name ackymal or hackmal, and its numerous variations, is derived from the blows they deal – but I was certain of the innocence of the marsh-tits.

'I'll shute ivry beggar I zee on my pays!'

'That's so, zur. John Kift be quite honest, zur,' said the rough and pleasant voice of Mrs. Kift behind me.

He agreed to allow the next tit time to feed before shooting, and then to bring the slain bird to me for dissection.

'You'll zee I be right, midear,' he called after me, as I went into the gloomy passage, wondering what sort of a fool he thought me. I had seen sparrows and finches pecking the fresh green leaves of sprouting peas in early spring, for I had seen them walking down my own rows, and had thrown stones near them. What business was it of mine if birds slew peas, and a man slew the birds? Slugs and

snails ate my seedling cabbages, and I burned them with quick-lime; but John Kift did not interfere with me for it. Was this feeling of pity for little happy birds shot in the sunshine an unnatural feeling, arising from discarded instincts; a useless feeling, as unproductive as a rainbow? Thought made me miserable.

The village street was bright and quiet. I noticed a hand drawing a curtain across a window. A girl ran past the gate, saying in a loud whisper, 'They'm coming,' and hustling a young sister into a cottage. A dog lying at the bend in the road by the shop got up, scratched, stared at something invisible to me, and sauntered away. I heard a shuffling of feet. Then round the corner came four youths, clad all in black, except for white bow-ties and white collars and white gloves. They moved very slowly, carrying a small white coffin on two cloth slings, one at each end. I saw blackness behind them, and hurried away.

Women were standing by the low churchyard wall, looking over the green mounds, and I stood among them, next to Mrs. Butt, who immediately told her three little girls – heavy Saxon type – to shut their rattle; and then smiled at me, showing her ruinous teeth. Mrs. Butt's five-month baby, without a stitch on its grubby body or a tooth in its gums, lying in a perambulator near, also smiled. I felt its chubby legs, and remarked how well it looked, but how cold it was in the shadow of the elm trees,

'Ah, I likes 'em to be 'ardy,' said Mrs. Butt, smiling again, and asking after my baby, who was born on the same night as her own. 'Fine li'l boy you've got!' I agree, and smile at the recollection of what Mrs. Butt is reported to have said to the parish nurse when told that her baby was not a boy. 'Cor darn, what beats me is where all these girls come from.'

'Tikey, get down!' scolds Mrs. Willy Gammon, mother of innumerable children and grandmother of several, to the seven-year-old merry boy who robbed one of my apple trees last year. Tikey laughs, and won't get down; he is the unconquerable sort, nervously and physically strong. Even when I whacked him hard, over that apple business, he didn't whine; but, with angry tears in his eyes, picked up apples and earth and flung them at me, crying, 'Ha, 'it 'im agen, wull 'ee? 'It 'im agen, wull 'ee, ye ould booger?' We respected each other afterwards, and I gave him the hazel stick for a souvenir; and now we meet as proper friends.

Daisy is Tikey's younger sister, then comes Boykins, whose round brownish face – all the Gammons have ruddy-brown faces – is still rather scared of me; it was Boykins, aged nearly four, who, from the road below, tearfully urged Tikey to kick me during the whacking. Daisy, red lips and soft brown eyes, regards me from the wall, as she cuddles the Gammon baby, a petulant and spiteful child, aged three, 'the last Mrs. Gammon will

have, surely, at her age,' says the village. Daisy's face is full of love; the little maid will make a good mother when she weds later on.

So I muse by the wall, whereon many children sit, eager for the sight of a baby's funeral. The bell tolls. Scientists tell us that the bony structure of the bat is nearer to the human frame than any other mammal: and lo! here are great human bats following the coffin with slow and shuffling steps, old women with strange and ugly faces, clothed in black. Their eyes peer under shapeless bonnets; their clothes, like wings of black shrivelled skin, seem to suffocate the personality. Tears drip out of their old eyes. They walk into the graveyard, and follow the parson into church.

'You come away from that grave, my boy! Young reskle, you! A-a-ah! You wait till I catch 'ee!'

'Ya-ar, ould booger!' cries a minute urchin playing alone by the small shallow grave. He does not care for his grannie, whose voice, harsh and broken, has just threatened him over the wall. The young rascal has blue eyes, and a split lip; his toe caps are kicked broken. His widowed grandmother looks after him; her daughter is in service in another part of the country, and rarely comes home. He is Ernie's cousin, and was christened Vivian Somerville Carter; but Ernie and his friends call him Babe. What a temper Babe had when he was really small, two years or so; when granfer was alive, and used to shut him up in a shed. Dreadful screams of

rage! 'A very backward baby' his grannie said to me once. 'Two and a half year old and 'a can't talk yet. All 'a can do is to swear.' But now he goes to school, and plays and fights with other boys, and is happy.

The mourners were in the church; the curious were looking over the wall; the bad boy was sitting by the shallow grave. He was scratching at the earth with his nails, and trying to push something into a hole. 'A-a-ah, you young limb!' scolded old Grannie Carter over the wall. 'Ya-aa-ar, ould booger! 'Ee can't catch I now!' taunted Vivian Somerville. He was tilling a kidney bean in the earth by the grave.

The grave was twelve feet from the wall. Like all the other graves, it lay west and east – the tiny feet would lie towards the east, awaiting the coming of Christ beyond the sunrise. By one of the trunks of the great elms many wreaths of flowers were laid, piled one on another, each with a card and lines of sympathetic writing; for the baby's death had touched many hearts. A red-haired man stood by them, copying the inscriptions into a penny notebook; he was the village correspondent of the local newspaper, which would describe the flowers as 'a wealth of floral tributes,' and for every name included in his list he would probably sell a copy on the following Thursday. He used to keep a motor-car, plying for hire in summer when the visitors came; but the red omnibuses took the

visitors, his car grew shabby and out-of-date; he became a labourer again, and his little boy took round papers, for times were bad.

The children on the wall were merry and noisy as the starlings on the church tower. Grannie Carter stole into the churchyard, grey and lumbering as a badger; but Babe saw her, and with a shrill laugh ran away among the tombs. 'Ya-aa-ha! Ye can't catch I naow! Ye can't catch I naow!' he taunted her, waiting for the intense delight of being chased. 'Ould Granmer Carter, ye can't catch I!'

Granmer Carter retreated, for something white had appeared out of the church porch, between the stone heads of the gargoyles, one chipped and frowning, the other whole and serene. The Rector, in his vestments, walked slowly, with composed face, his hands clasped before him. Behind, the youths bearing the coffin, and the black straggling files of mourners. Vivian Somerville gave a startled look and ran out of the churchyard. Children on the wall were pulled down by their mothers, or hushed into silence.

Slowly the mourners settled round the grave. The father was a tall man, with a face yellow as tallow, and a black moustache; a thatcher by trade. He swayed, and looked in the grave, with dull, dry eyes. The face of his remaining child, a youth of eighteen, was also sallow, but puffy with weeping. The old grandfather stood beside the grandmother; sometimes he gulped, like the

grandson, and stared wildly as the priest recited, in a low and placid voice, the words of the Church of England Burial Service.

'Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live . . .' the mother, shrunken in black mourning, gave a whimpering cry – '. . . and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay.' The parson spoke without feeling. No beauty bloomed in his words, to raise an image in the minds around him. He was sixty years old, and looked forty; perhaps if he had been deeply moved by all the services for burial he had conducted he would have looked eighty. A heavy trundling sound, and the far-away singing of many voices, caused some of the women by the wall to look northwards; children's faces followed their gaze. Round the corner of the Rectory wall came a big yellow motor coach, filling the roadway, and the singing grew suddenly loud. The service went on. A hatless man stood with his back to the driver, conducting the choir with his hands. Dust swirled behind the coach, which quickly slowed, and as it rolled past the burial place the voices sank, but did not die away. The Welsh miners on holiday were singing one of their grand and inspiring national choruses; eyes were brightened when they had passed, except the sad ones by the grave.

As the coffin was being lowered, the mother uttered stifled whimpers, as she looked through the

white composition of the lid, to the small pale face within. She clutched her husband, longing to fling herself down, break the shut lid, and take the little one, whose every laugh and wail and cry in life were still part of her living heart. She heard words, well-worn words, that since childhood had never entered her consciousness: words, 'O Lord God, holy and most merciful Saviour, Lord most holy, O God most mighty, O holy and merciful Saviour.' She tried secretly to smile to herself, and whimpered, 'I believe, I believe'; while her husband held her tightly, his face a duskier yellow.

Zip-chee-chee. See-see, see-see! A family of marsh-tits flittered in the shadowed leaves over us, restless and happy as they peered and lit on the twigs, hanging head-down to peer with bright eyes for green-fly and caterpillar.

'Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ; Who shall change our vile body, that it may be like unto His glorious body, according to the mighty working, whereby He is able to subdue all things to Himself.'

Sit-ee sit-ee sit-ee! A coal-tit was wandering with them. I could see the streak of white on his black head. *Zip-chee zip-chee*, as they passed, some high in the tree, others just above my head. They swung and fluttered, always calling to one another, sometimes peering for hawk or owl on the branches. For days and weeks they had been wandering in the

spinneys and orchards and gardens, sleeping in holes in trees, in the eaves of thatch, ivy on walls, warm and together. I saw the parent birds fly over the Lower House to the hollow of gardens beyond; and then I was listening to words that seemed false and unnatural, and harsh to the miserable beings standing black, as though charred, in the summer sunshine.

'We give Thee hearty thanks, for that it hath pleased Thee to deliver this our sister out of the miseries of this sinful world . . .'

After the service, the priest turned to the mother and said, in a voice more like his own, 'Do not grieve, Mrs. Ridd. She is now safe in the arms of Jesus, and one day you will see her there.' 'Aiy, aiy!' said the old fisherman, her father. 'She'm safe i'th' arms of Jesus,' and looked at the sky. He walked away, to get a glass of beer, and looked into the sun's face, which dried his tears, and gave strength of life after grief. I heard the report of a gun.

Children scrambled down from the wall, forgetting what they had seen. Observing Vivian Somerville Carter back on the grass by the flowers, I went to him. He was banging ants with a stone, watched by a small quiet boy who wore an enormous cap. This boy was a visitor to the village, and whenever I had seen him, on the sands, in the street, or on his own doorstep, he was wearing the same large cap. He did not play with the boys of

the village, but stood about near them; and once, when I had playfully thrown a minute apple at him, he had gone away with injured dignity, and told his father, who had complained to me.

'Don't you feel sorry, Babe, that this poor little baby is dead?' I asked.

'No.'

'Would you be sorry to see Ernie laid in a grave?'

'No.'

'Wouldn't you cry, Babe?'

'No.'

'What, didn't you cry when Granfer died?'

'No. Uncle Bill did. I zeed un going home down the road crying.'

Uncle Bill was Ernie's father, called Revvy because, years before, he had worked in the Rectory garden.

'Would you care if I died, Babe?'

'Booger, no!' he replied, furiously digging with his nails.

'Well, then, will you come and live with me, as you are not happy with Granmer?'

'No, I tull 'ee, you bloomin' vule you, no!'

Yes, I was a blooming fool to continue the inquisition; and I continued:

'But, think, Babe. You will have a nice time, go to bed late, have all the apples you want, and go down to the sand-water every day. Won't you?'

Babe called the sea, sand-water.

'Ya-aa-ah-ee! Ould Daddy Wisson!'

I was Ould Daddy Wisson.

'And think, Babe. You will have a nice bed, all to yourself.'

Then the large-capped boy joined the conversation.

'I've got a bed of me own where I live, in a big house up to Exeter.'

'Ya-aa!' jeered Babe, 'It's a poop bed!'

'Vivian Carter,' the other solemnly warned him, 'Remember you are in the churchyard.' Five years old, and already matured, thought I; poor little man. Then I saw John Kift look over the wall, and lean his elbows along it. He was the brother of the fisherman, and great-uncle of the dead baby.

'Well, well!' he said to me, in his loud voice, as I stopped by him. 'Did ye ever see anything like it? Look at that, now! Look at them all. Well, well! I call that a turrible waste of money, all they flowers.' He stared round again, as though unable to realise what he saw. 'Well I never. Did 'ee hever zee anything like it now? Pounds and pounds, I reckon, they flowers must have cost. No flowers will bring it back, noomye. Aiy, pounds and pounds. Well, well! Much better to have given the money to the parents. Pounds and pounds, they flowers must have cost. More than all the doctors' bills, I should say.'

He put his hand in his pocket, and drew out two dead marsh-tits, which he put on the wall.

'I don't reckon they doctors be much cop,' he

mused. 'Five doctors Liza took the baby to, and all described bottles and bottles of medicine, but with all of them twarnt no gude. No zur! I reckon she would have done better, and saved money, if she had kep to one doctor, instead of trittin' around from wan to anither, from Crosstree to Town, from Town to Combe. Tidden no sense in it. What do 'ee think, Mrs. Carter?'

Granmer Carter was looking at the flowers again.

'Poor li'l mite,' she croaked, slowly and sadly, ''Tis most butiful flowers I ever did see. 'Tis a loss for the mother, 'tis a loss, and after eighteen year.'

''Twas going on fine the night before, too!' said the cheerful voice of Mrs. Butt, returning with her perambulator and three yellow-haired girls. 'Why, only the night before the pool li'l mite died, it ate nearly a plateful of tinned salmon, so Mrs. Smaldon told me.'

So small were the bodies of the ackymals, and so strong the fingers of John Kift, that it was a difficult matter to find, among the feathery pieces, the crops of the birds. Vivian and Ernie stood on the iron toe-tips of their boots, to see the interesting *post-mortem*. The gullets were far too small for the passage of a pea; and no green fragments were found in the crops. Nevertheless, John Kift, pointing to minute black specks, cried, 'What did I tell 'ee? I knowed I was right! What more could ye want? They ackymals be master rogues for stealin' pays, and I'll shute ivry wan I zee!'

THE WATER OUSELS

Dripple and splash and murmur of water running so clear among the rocks lured me to rest on the green sward by a little fall. A child could step over the stream, which was scarcely half a mile from its source on the northern slope of Dunkery. Beautiful it was in the sunlit solitude of the valley, by the oaks and ash trees with their warm boles and branches and guarded buds, to lean over the pool and drink the bright water, to lift and loosen through my fingers the scoured gravel of its bed, to see the green dripping mosses so near my cheek, to watch the bubbles rise and slide away from the tail of the fall.

And lying there, with the sun on my back, and looking at the broken glitters on the stream through eye-lashes closed to shear the dazzle, all conscious thought slowly lapsed from my mind, and the song of water-and-stones flowed through my being. The sun was broken into many glittering birds beating their wings in the water, and the stream sang and sang, until all my mind was a rill of music.

For how long I lay thus I do not know, but as I listened dreamily to the water-song, it seemed to

arise from the rocks and the mosses of the moor and to run faint in the sky; and to come to earth again, suddenly sharpened and sweetened. The mist of water-dream moved from me, and the lovely change rang loud in my ears.

My mind was now alert, but I lay still as the green-swarded rock under me. The song ceased, and I heard, above the water-sounds, a noise like a pebble striking a shillet. Then over the glitter of ripples I saw the beat of short black wings, and a bird alighted on a rock eighteen inches away from my eyes. The black toes of its fragile feet were lapped by the fall-shaken waters. By the snow-whiteness of its chin and throat and breast I knew the water ousel, or dipper.

The bird jerked its short tail, and flew a yard up the stream. It sang as it walked down a sloping rock into the water, and when it had gone under I lifted my head. My face was just above the pool, and I saw a blurred pied image moving into view. It became a diminished dipper, walking on the stones of the bed, which it grasped with its feet. It stopped, and turned over a stone, taking a caddis-grub, stuck around with a shell of gravel, in its beak. The beak was lifted, and the dipper saw me through ten inches of water.

It turned, and flew through the water. I jumped to my feet and watched it oaring itself with its wings; and then a whiteness gleamed in the midst of broken water, and the dipper flew up. Drops

thrown from its wings flashed in sunlight. *Jitt!* it cried, speeding up the valley in sturdy flight, and following the way of the water. *Jitt!* another cry by my feet, as a second bird flew past with a drumming of wings.

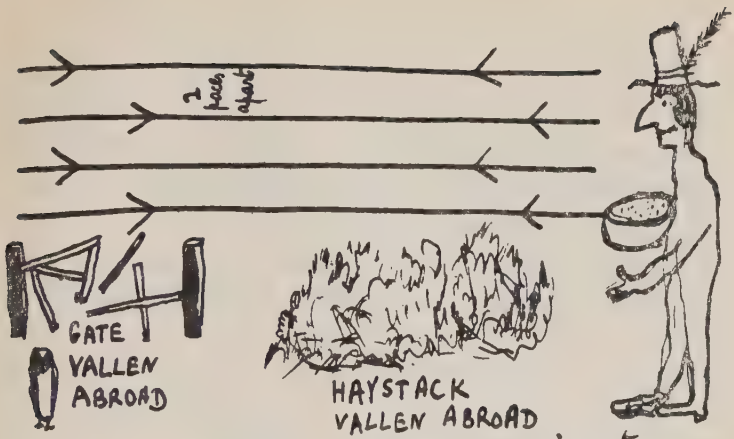
Stepping over the stream, I knelt on the bank, and peered at the moss that hung, glimmering with drops, beside the fall. The height of the overhanging rock from the water to the swarded bank was little more than a foot, and I scanned it, inch by inch, until I saw what might have been the opening of the nest. Stepping back again, I lay down and craned my head, while drops jetted from under the fall splashed my cheeks. Gently putting a finger into the wet moss, I felt a single egg, warm from the laying. I drew it out slowly, in dread lest it be crushed between fingers which had lost the sensitive touch of boyhood; but it came safely to the palm of my hand, and rested there a moment, a delicate and unspotted white, before rolling back into its nest-lining of dry oak-leaves – a nest cunningly founded and hidden, for it was impossible to determine the woven from the growing moss.

Water ousels haunt all the rocky streams running off the moor, and in spring nearly every culvert by which the lanes cross the waters of the valleys has its beard of moss hanging from a stone-space or a ledge under. I have a happy memory of such a nest just above Luckwell bridge, in Somerset, in May 1925. The old stone culvert was about to be

pulled down for a new bridge of iron and concrete, to bear the heavy motor coaches of the holiday season. The young dippers were yet half-fledged; one yellow maw had poked out, and tried to swallow my finger, when I lifted the loose moss-strands in the opening. The road-menders told me that any day orders might come from the District Council to begin the work; and I said that I supposed when that happened, the nestlings would be crushed or drowned? 'No,' said the old man I spoke to, as though it might be of a matter as usual as the taking off of his coat before beginning work, 'they birds be God a'Mighty's cocks and hens, and us'll put the li'l birdies where th'ould birds med feed them.'

Day after day I passed by the culvert, but the ferns on the parapet, the hazels and brambles on the banks by the arch stood as before, and no work was begun. A fortnight later, as I was wading to the nest, a young speckled dipper fluttered out with a sharp cry, and dived into the water; and as I was staring at the ringed splash, another flew out with a cry, and vanished in a splash. *Jitt! Jitt!* the parent birds were standing on rocks ten yards away; and hearing them calling, the three remaining fledglings fluttered down into the water.

God a'Mighty's cocks and hens! The dipper sips song from the stones and the water, and for me the words of an old man in Somerset make it the more beautiful.



(Epigraph. It should be 'valled abroad', in true dialect. Also blackthorn stamens are yellow: the whitethorns are pink. Poetic licence, please)

A FARMER'S LIFE

I.

The field sloped up gradually to the blue and white horizon of the southern sky. Cloud shadows fled over the brown harrowed earth, across which the farmer was pacing in a straight line. He carried a basket in the crook of his left arm. Every two paces he cast a handful of seed left and right in one throw, like the motion of a whisking horse's tail. When he came to the vorridge he walked back along his tracks, thus casting twice over the same area.

The seed hopped from the broken clods, but so exact was each broadcast that the field was evenly covered. In his own words, 'the seed sowed home.'

Years before, when a young man, he had cast sometimes a little too vigorously, so that the hopping seed had lodged in his tracks, and sprouted fourfold where it should have been twofold. Again in his words, 'the corn was oversown.'

During a pause on the vorridge – the fore-hedge – where the stroyle grass was matted thick, he told me about the piebald mare, which would, on being taken out in the morning, harrow two and a half rounds only, and then stop. Nothing would make her move until, in the farmer's words,

'I flipped off the ploo chain, and give her a cut across the back. She drave round all right after that, but stopped again after two and a half rounds. But my maid can do anything wi' the mare, you know. The mare will follow her anywhere.'

He told me that he could have won many ploughing championships if 'I'd a mind to it. Why, my dear soul, I can't go wrong. So long as I could zee a stick in the vorridge, I'd drave straight to'n, straight as a gun-shot.'

When he was ploughing I used to walk to the field, called Foot Park, to see the smooth gleam on the new-turned furrows, while the gulls swirled in snowflakes immediately behind the tall stooping bewhiskered figure, alighting to take worm or grub and nervously jumping up into the white swirl again. On the return I heard the ripping of the coulter through the clover roots behind the soft thuds of the mare's feet. Farmer nodded, horse

and man walked past, the snow eddy veered downwind, and the turf was rearing up and curling over like a wave breaking aslant a shore; and diminishing the soft shearing noise of the bright ploughshare. By the hedge lay the sack he had brought lest it might rain, watched by Ship, the cattle dog. Fifty yards away the gulls were unafraid again, alighting and walking in semi-circles round the plough, hurrying to the new furrow, reforming the screaming swirl. The yellow-white cut points of stroyle grass lay in the quick-drying furrow. At the vorridge the gentle voice of the farmer: – 'Whey, Prince! Come on up!' The off-side horse swung inwards, and walked up the furrow. The dog came over to smell and see anything interesting, and rolled on the beautiful new-turned earth.

2.

Hearing the repeated ringing of a hand-bell in the village one sunny morning towards the end of May, I went out to discover what was happening. By the stream stood the daughter of Hole Farm. She was talking to Mrs. Revvy. Both were looking up into the sky. Then she would ring the bell vigorously, and hold her head sideways, as though listening. 'They're playing, you know!' she said thrice as I approached, a smile of the upper air on her face. 'Lovely sounds! I like to hear it, you know.'

'Will you get them, do you think?' said Mrs. Revvy.

The girl shook the bell again; and listened rapturously to the humming in the tree-tops.

The soft south wind rustled the leaves of the churchyard elms, and the pale blue sky beyond the tree-tops could not be seen except through the eyelashes. The humming filled the bright celestial air of morning.

'Our bees are playing!' said the girl, turning her shining eyes to me. 'I like to hear them!'

The other woman looked amused; and then doubtful.

'You'll lose them, won't 'ee?'

The girl shook the bell again.

''Tes better if you can give them rough music, ban't it?' asked Mrs. Revvy.

I had not heard the term applied to bee-calling before. Rough music has gone out of the parish life. It was given outside the cottages of people who were disliked: such as a single man who got a young woman with child and denied it, or a married man who neglected a sick and subdued wife for another woman. The instruments for this rough music were of what is called the percussive type; old pails, baths, cans, and troughs were banged and clattered under the windows of the accused, and sometimes thrown at the door.

'Oh, they'll come to the bell if they come at all,' replied the girl, ringing the bell again.

The minutest dark specks were playing about the tree-top; wandering down in whizzing curves until they were seen as bees, as a succession of bees, as a menace of bees buzzing too near my head. They were a community in mystic revolution, agitated and without city, a swarm of selfless life-specks whose sight-memory was as a gallery of bright and living mirrors now unfixed and broken, and glinting with dangerous shards. They had left the security of dark galleries and cell-civilisation for the unrealizable void, filled with a mystic and delirious urge for – what? What the spirit urging them forth on the frailty of wings iridescent and tenuous as the pale summer sky?

A dark Assyrian beard began to grow on one of the topmost twigs of the elm. The bees were clustering about the new queen. The girl ceased to shake the hand bell.

She was about twenty-seven years old, slightly built, wearing heavy leather boots, with her hair drawn back tightly, almost severely, from her forehead. I never heard her say an unkind or even an angry word to anyone. She passed dogs, men, children, women, with a smile and cheery words. The farmer told me that once, years ago, the doctor, who had come to see another member of the family, was sitting by the fire, when suddenly he called the shy little girl to him and 'began to feel her head all auver,' much to the farmer's terror. 'Your maid has a very fine head' said the doctor.

The farmer told me how this early prophecy had been borne out. One evening up to the Higher House, he said, was sitting Stanley Zeale, a wonderful clever scholar he was supposed to be: and Stanley Zeale asked him that evening how long it would take him, the farmer, to count a million sovereigns, counting sixty to a minute. 'Now, Stan took a stump of a pencil and a thunderin' great sheet of paper and scored all one side with figures, and then spread himself all auver the table on the other side; and when all the paper was covered with figures Stan gived it up. So I came home and told my maid, and she worked out the right answer in no time. Why, 'twould take a week reckoning a million sovereigns the way you or I would do it, you know!'

He said much more about other things; using wonderful phrases, simple and exact, but alas, either I forget them afterwards or alter them unknowledgeably when I try to transfer them to this book. One thing I cannot forget: the light in his daughter's face as she looked into the sky, and listened to the bees playing.

3.

As summer declines and the corn is cut and carried, long-continued squeals of pigs are sometimes heard in the village. In days gone by only the earlier squeals were clearly audible, for in

most of the cottages the pigs were killed in the kitchen. The big hooks by which the animals were pulled up are still to be seen in the beams crossing the ceilings. Later came the pig-form, a narrow wooden bed standing on four legs, on which the pig was thrown, and tied, and then killed.

Another method, which I observed once behind Thunderbolt's cottage, was to tie a rope round the upper jaw of the animal, pull it out squealing from the dark and mucky pig's house, pass the rope over the lintel of the door, haul it up until only the hind trotters were touching the ground, and then, moving forward with rolled-up shirt sleeves, firmly and steadily thrust the knife into the shrieking throat. I remember the shrill cries of Thunderbolt's sister, because she had missed, with the bowl she had been holding ready in her uneasy hands for many minutes, the first dark spurt. 'Catch'n! Catch'n!' she cried, thrusting the bowl into the hands of her brother. The blood was stirred vigorously, lest it might thicken and clot.

The blood was needed to make what used to be called in the village Bloody Pot. After killing his pig, one October morning, the farmer of Hole Farm explained to me that there were 'two kinds of pot to a pig.' One was the long pot, and the other the gut pot. Three days, at least, was needed to clean the pots; I used to see the farmer's daughter kneeling on the flat stone under the little fall of the stream, pushing a stick through the 'pots' like a

long finger on an endless glove, washing inside and out. Blood, groats, heart, liver, chitterlings – all these made the savoury Bloody Pot or Bloody Pie, which, fried with bacon, was considered a rare treat.

Once, when I heard the squeal of a pig coming out of Hole Farm, I went into the yard. There the black pig was lying on its fat back upon the form, its snout twisted by a rope, its legs kicking, its ears flapping, gulping its life out. A neighbouring farmer, a devout chapel-goer, and a handy man with the knife, stood by it, relief on his kindly face. It was a job that both men were glad to finish. While the last shuddering groan came out of the flabby carcass, I enquired why didn't he take the blood? The farmer looked at me, and said solemnly, 'Touch not the blood, for it is the life thereof.'

I did not understand. 'Touch not the blood, for it is the life thereof,' he explained.

'Is that in the Bible?'

'You know it be! Didn't 'ee learn that when you was a boy to Zunday School?'

'So that is why you don't collect it for Black Pudding?'

'Aiy.'

I looked at the pig, at the red trickle spreading away into the hoof-beaten mud of the yard, at the wild eyes and spread nostrils of the horse standing with ears strained back in the upper half of the stable door.

' "Touch not the blood, for it is the life thereof",'

he quoted again, while the other man wiped his knife on some straw. 'It be in the Bible. There's no gettin' away from that, you know!'

When I went back I found a small double sheet of printed paper lying on my table. It was the *Monthly Bulletin of the Parish Church of Ham Saint George*, as some of the inhabitants recently decided to name the village. Glancing through it I came to an item under the heading *Parish Matters*, which was immediately significant : –

> 'The Diocesan Inspector of Schools reported as follows on our Schools :—"The Infants showed a keen interest in the Bible stories and in the pictures. The teaching has been carefully given.
>
> "In all the standards the children were attentive and their answers showed that the syllabus had been covered. Unsparing efforts have evidently been made to secure a general level of efficiency, and to make the religious teaching of real practical value. Attention was good and interest strong and there was a very reverent atmosphere." '

4.

The cow walked to her milking along the lane, the farmer walked behind her, the dog walked behind the farmer, all at the same slow pace. The cow was gaunt, with shoulders and hips protruding. The farmer looked like his cow. A worn and pathetic pair, man and beast. There was a dumb fondness between them, based on habit.

After the milking, the cow walked slowly out of the farm gates and up the lane. Twelve steps from the gate it stopped, and turned its head to stare at the

gate. For months the farmer and a piebald horse had come out of the gate, a horse which walked as silently as the cow on the lane, for its hoofs were unshod. Every night for months the gate had been pulled open: the iron bar, with its rusty worn ring, had clattered: dog had barked with needless violence, and been cursed by its master: the door clattered to, and a procession of cow, horse, man, dog, had gone up the lane.

This night the piebald horse was not there, and the cow lowed vainly for its companion. Dog barked, running violently at the cow – a big collie dog, frightened of every other dog in the village – and snapping at its heels; master shouted; the cow turned its head, and swung slowly up the lane. At the top of the rise it stopped again, and lowed.

The next day a motor-van backed through the gate into the farmyard; and came out again with something under sacking that shook to the uneven roadway, and wobbled clumsy feet. It was said in the village that the piebald horse had fallen down in its stable, and been unable to rise because of weakness. And three nights later, the gaunt cow, after lowing each evening when the gate rattled and no piebald horse came out on its horny feet, lay down in its stall and just died.

A little boy lived in the farmhouse. He slept and ate his food there, lit the fire in the morning and swept the kitchen, and helped Farmer in the farmyard and along the lane. The farmer's daugh-

ter washed his face and brushed his hair, smarming it with water, and sent him off to school; never had the boy looked so smart. His mother was paid sixpence a week for his services. The boy said, 'The old cow only had a bit of straw to ait and slape on. The hay had gone black as your hat, and there was only straw to ait.'

Horse and cow had grown weaker and weaker; they had survived the bitter winter, but were doomed by it to die in the spring. And now it was April, the dryest April for years, and the farmer's fields were still unploughed. Other fields were harrowed and sown and rolled during the dry easy days; but not the farmer's. So many of his hours were concerned with the errors and wrong headedness of his neighbours that he had no time to farm his land as others farmed theirs. He had no plan of farm work. If he borrowed a hurdle, to stop a gap for a day, until he could make up the gap, the hurdle would be there a year later. If he gathered in his hay before the July rains rotted it where it lay, he would not thatch the rick before the September gales, and it was blown over, soaked by autumnal rains, and rotted when it was most needed.

When a new farmer took the farm at Higher Ham, and started with a horse and cart to sell milk at cottage doors in the morning, the farmer, it is said, wrote to the Sanitary Inspector and suggested that the drains of the Higher Ham farm, together with the beasts, should be inspected. The Inspector

came out, found nothing wrong with Higher Ham farm, and called upon the informant farmer, where he found his advice was needed. Our farmer was not concerned with rivalry, for there was none. He felt he was old-established in the village, and could therefore assume duty, like some letter-writers to newspapers, *pro bono publico*.

The concern he felt for others was as genuine as the feeling which prompted him to gather a bunch of daffodils from his orchard when my first boy was born, and to bring them to the door with the warning, 'They'm for the baby – mind! For the little boy!' Long afterwards I saw the reason of what to the village was a waywardness in his nature, making him interfere with advice to others; the secret was in the flowers. Although he may not have known it, the thought that had led him to offer flowers for the innocency of new life was really hope and dream for the future. Gaunt, worn, irritable and argumentative, deemed morose by many, such was the farmer; but what dreams were tangled and lost hopelessly in his heart?

SWALLOWS IN CLIFFS

One afternoon the lower air at the landward end of the promontory was streaked and scribbled upon, as it were, by the slow and aimless flying of innumerable insects. They touched one's face, and tickled the nostrils. They were like a jumble of sooty music notes tossed into the blue by an unknown hand.

These flies, hatched a few hours ago by the sun, each seeking a mate, rose and fell and drifted over an area of, roughly, seven acres. The air was warm and windless. While I sat on the sward, ruddy with sheeps' sorrel, a rush of wings made me look up. Many swallows had arrived, with a confused sweet twittering which in fancy was the score being sung, a fragment of cosmic harmony.

Hundreds of swallows were passing to and fro, dipping and gliding and hovering momentarily with tuning-fork tails vibrating. The feast made them excited. Only at migration time in autumn had I seen so many blue birds gathered together. There must have been nearly a thousand of them.

Some hours afterwards, as I lay on the grassy wall of my garden, waiting for the white owls to

peer out under the thatch of the cottage and sail away to the evening hunting, a thought came to my slow pastoral brain. Whence had the swallows come? The village was a mile from the sea, and only a few pairs were nesting there. Nearer the sea were two farmhouses, but less than a dozen pairs had made their mud hovels on the beams under the cattle sheds. I remembered also that the vagrant band – too disorderly in light-heartedness to be called a pack or a flock – had come from the west, from the headland and the open Atlantic beyond. Often when lying above the precipice, watching the gulls weaving and interweaving, and the jackdaws tumbling down the windy uptrends to their nesting holes, I had seen swallows there. I had imagined they came from inland barns and villages.

The following morning I walked along the north side of the headland. When a boy I had read that swallows made their nests in caves before men built houses with wide chimneys. They still nest in some old farmhouse chimneys. At low water I climbed down a cliff path to a cave. Water dripped from the coloured jagged roof, and the drops made musical sounds. No swallows there; only an old blind seal who lay half out of a pool, not in the least alarmed by the hand that patted his head.

Returning on the lowest path, by the cliff edge, however, I found the colony. Why I had not discovered it in former years, I could not say, except that such a thing as a colony of swallows,

their nests on a series of ledges about thirty feet above the sea, never occurred to me. Is it unique in England? Some of the nests were covered in, except for an opening arc at the top, like the nest of the house-martin, but I saw a swallow climbing into it.

Where did they get the mud to build their houses? Did they bring it from the mainland lanes, a distance of nearly two miles?

For years the number of swallows has been decreasing, according to most observers who write of birds. Certainly many cattle sheds are deserted in the village, which once were filled with the sweet summer twitter of the cock birds singing to their brooding mates. Is it because of lessening numbers, or because the bird is returning to ancient habit?

When I consider certain years of my life which were spent with civilized Man in the mass, with his ways of darkness and death, I would that I could advance the Jefferies thought – 'The beautiful swallows, be tender to them, for they symbol all that is best in nature, and all that is best in our hearts – and desert the old sheds and barns of the mind, and return to the simple rock of my being.'

A ROMANCE OF OLD-WORLD COURTING

One evening when I went into the cottage where I used to have my meals, I interrupted a dance by an old woman of eighty years of age, the mother of my landlady, named Mrs. Hector. The name suited her. The dance, a mixture of skirt and jig and clog, being over, her smiling and middle-aged daughter suggested that I should hear the story of mother's courting. After a hearty burst of laughter, and a slap with her huge hand on her knee, so vigorous that it would almost have broken the neck of a cat had one been sitting there, Mrs. Hector began eagerly : –

'I were crippling along, and 'er wanted vor to cut me carns.'

This puzzled me; and the daughter, proud and smiling, hastened to explain:—

'Mother was sixteen, do 'ee zee, and a chap wanted vor to court her, and Mother pushed'n in the stream. He wasn't put off by that, and followed her about still, do 'ee zee, and one day he offered to cut her corns, when he saw that her feet was bad. What did 'ee answer back, mother?'

'"I can cut they myself," I told'n.

'"Yurr," he said, "When be I and thee going to get married?"

'"What's that," I told'n. "Marry 'ee? Noomye, I damned well work hard now, and if I had thee, thou miserable old mommet, I'd have to work a damned sight harder. Get out of my way, I've got vor to milk ten or twelve cows."'

The neighbours sitting in the kitchen roared with laughter; the old woman bellowed with them. She had light blue eyes, and massive forearms bared to the elbow. What was a mommet? I enquired. They told me it was a scarecrow.

'Aiy, a miserable old mommet he was, a mumbling boy if ever there was one,' went on Mrs. Hector, 'Wan day 'a came in the furnace-house as I was taking a ham out of the furnace, and started messing and pulling me about, until I told'n I'd put'n i' th' boiler, and I would'v, too, if 'a hadn't cleared out! 'A were full of words as a dog be vull of vleas, a nimpsypiminy chap, 'a were. No cop.'

'Mother worked on a farm, you see,' explained the daughter, while Mrs. Hector listened with keen delight and approval. 'She started at eleven years of age to work, beginning at six o'clock in the morning and going on to the night.'

'One day 'a met me carrying a yoke, and 'a wanted to carry it for me, and when I told'n to shog off, 'a pulled my bonnet off, so I catched'n

holt, and shoved'n right in the ditch, and chucked a pail of milk over'n. That stopped'n. Oh! a miserable old mommet 'a was, a proper mumbling boy.'

One of the listeners in the kitchen was Uncle Joe, an old man who lived in a cottage near mine. He used to have his meals, like myself, with Mrs. Hector's married daughter. He was a lonely figure, living without cat or dog; going at the same hour every night to the Higher or Lower House to drink his pint of fivepenny ale, and listen to the talk of the men there. Sometimes he spoke, but his words were not much heeded. He was ponderously interested in his garden, his weekly pension, the weekly newspaper he received from a daughter far away in service – coal strikes, murders, these yurr Red chaps from Roosha, flying the Atlantic. He believed everything he read, although he often prefaced a description of week-old news with the statement "Tes perhaps a lot of lies in the paper, but, did you see that——' His cottage was dark and rarely ventilated, and smelled of stale tobacco smoke, musty wallpaper, and mouldering clothes. Like most of the villagers, he disliked an open window, believing that colds and diseases came in with fresh air. Uncle Joe clipped his beard three times a year, usually on a Sunday, and for a day everyone he met was informed of it. He had an old photograph of his six sons, with himself in the middle, taken a dozen years before, at the outbreak

of the Great War. He was very proud of the photograph, and showed it to me nine times in five years, with the same remarks each time. 'Now just you give me your opinion of these fine boys of mine.'

I had noticed during the dancing of the eighty-year-old Mrs. Hector that the eyes of Uncle Joe had lost their usual blue vacancy. There he sat in the corner, bowler hat on head, laughing and wheezing, 'Did ye iver in all your life zee anything like it? My dear soul!' and the pipe dropped out of his gums with excitation. The next morning, coming into the cottage for my mid-day meal, I overheard from the sitting-room this conversation between Mrs. Hector and her latest admirer. It took place after dinner, when the daughter and her husband were out of the kitchen.

Uncle Joe, puffing at pipe, hat on head, hands in trousers pockets. 'Did 'ee ever think of taking another husband?'

Mrs. Hector, promptly. 'Noomye!'

Uncle Joe, after several puffs, reflectively 'I've been thinking I'd like to see a woman about my place.'

Mrs. Hector. 'I wouldn't have another man, not if 'a were decked in diamonds!'

Uncle Joe. 'What then, did your other man serve 'ee bad?'

Mrs. Hector. 'Noomye! 'A were as proper a man as ever walked ground. 'A were as good a

man as ever broke bread. I never heard'n swear, noomye, he never even zaid dang to a dog!'

Uncle Joe. 'Wull, I've been thinking I'd like to have someone to do the cooking down in my place. 'Tes a nice comfortable house, and not damp, like some be.'

Mrs. Hector. 'I don't trouble.'

Uncle Joe. 'I thought 'ee might suit me, that's all.'

Mrs. Hector. 'Not if 'ee were decked in diamonds'.

Uncle Joe, scraping to his feet, puffing pipe, and preparing to return to his cottage, 'Oo well, tidden no odds.'

MY OWLS

I.

Does the country bore you after, say, a fortnight? It depends on your mind and its power of observation. But you would not have been bored last night had you been sitting with me in my cottage – called The Owlery by the villagers – before those brass and lilac flames biting the hissing elm branches.

For quite suddenly, as I was reading Arnold Bennett's *Books and Persons*, a frail scream was in the white-washed room – an old room, built by field-workers before men smoked tobacco. A room of tunnelled walls, wherein at night feet scamper and unseen things squeak. The scream was like a pig being noosed for killing, but even Billy Goldsworthy would not kill a pig at midnight.

My spaniel looked at me excitedly. The cat left her one kitten, and stood with waving tail, intent, like a little lion, on the lime-ash floor. Her eyes were green. I rose quietly and opened the door, and the scream seemed to be coming from the stars. I walked down the drang, or stone-set passage, and the noise followed me, always remote and ghostly.

Outside in the night, a throaty, bubbling cry tore the darkness – skirr-rr-r! Signal of the parent owl's coming. A white bird, moth-like, with wings stretching a yard floated through the elms. I went back into the living-room. The noise through the ceiling increased. Thump! Something was running about on the ceiling upstairs. Sounds of struggle, squeals, flump-flumping. Skirr-rr-r, as the old bird floated away to the corn fields, leaving the fledging owlet with a great rat, which was alive.

You should have been with me in my dark room under the glimmering uneven ceiling, to hear the screeching, the screaking, the screaming, the angry squealing, the raging of rat and owlet, the wrostling of fur and feather above my ceiling! They seemed to be wearing clogs. I could hear the owlet slogging with his long beak on the rat's skull. The mix-up went on, while my cat fumed and paced the floor-boards and growled, and the spaniel whined his immense excitement and leapt up at me. Then it was over, and the rat dashed over the ceiling, too big and strong for the owlet, and rustled away down the thick tunnelled wall, full of life and fight.

I returned to my wood-fire, and my book. The dog sighed and slept; the cat settled still on my knee. I heard a rustle in the corner by the unused beehive and saddle. There sat the rat, washing a bloody face. Skirr-rr-r, the rat gibbered, flicked round, and vanished.

2.

The birds enter by an angle-shaped opening where the wall does not fill the apex. The opening is large enough for a man to scramble through, with the aid of a ladder.

Here are some facts that I learnt during my first year of living in The Owlery. It was a time of great drought, and possibly an increase of mice.

On April 17th, the first egg was laid. Another appeared on the 18th, and a third on the 19th. There was no nest. The eggs rested on the lath and plaster of the ceiling, among ancient mice bones and fragments of owl-pellets – the owl swallows its prey whole and afterwards casts up from the crop the undigested portion.

During the second week in May the three eggs were hatched, and two more were laid. The owlets were blind, partially naked, and made a shrill, lisping noise for food.

By midsummer there were three fully-fledged owlets over my ceiling; two snow-white bundles with long hooked beaks and immense claws; two tiny lisping parcels of skin and blindness; and two fresh eggs.

A month later there were five grown owls, four adolescents, two babies, and one addled egg.

I climbed up, crept warily over the sagging ceiling amid bones, fur, feathers, and beetle-skins, and examined my owlery. The grown owls shrieked

at me and flapped into the far gloom, the adolescents rushed away, and the babies blinked.

What astonished me was the number of dead rodents lying near the nest. I counted twenty-seven mice, nineteen young rats, two sparrows, and forty-two field voles.

The time was ten o'clock in the morning. At seven o'clock in the evening I climbed up and nothing remained of them. Ninety animals eaten by eleven young owls in nine hours! And this, moreover, during the time of rest and sleep.

Lying on the grassy slope of garden wall in the summer dimmit-light, I watched the parent birds at work.

At sunset they emerged like unfolded white blooms against the reddish-purple-grey tower of the church, and floated eastwards over the tombstones to the glebe field.

At intervals of from three to six minutes either the cock or the hen would return with a mouse, or mice, held in beak or dropped foot. Their children hissed frantically, the prey was cast among them, and the bird sailed away, pursued by screaming swifts.

Throughout the summer nights the toiling owls brought food for their young. When they fed themselves I know not. They worked for about an hour and a half after dawn.

For themselves and their family the barn owls caught a hundred and fifty mice every night.

From April till the end of August I calculated that 10,000, or the equivalent, were caught.

It is consoling for the bird-lover to know that the owl's tremendous worth is now appreciated; but what is not well-known is the fact that he pairs for life and is a most tender, loyal, and considerate fellow, helping as he does to incubate the eggs and feed his sons and daughters.

Epigraph. I lived in that £5 a year cottage for six years. When I left, the new tenant, a mason, filled up the opening, making the wall neat and tidy, while I looked on, feeling as though I were being smothered; then to my relief I saw that he was leaving a space just large enough for the birds to fly out.

THE ZEALE BROTHERS

One Saturday evening in late spring when I went up to the Higher House to get a game of table skittles I saw Sailor sitting heavy and moody under the clock. A pint glass of sixpenny, from which he had taken a couple of gulps, stood on the long table before him, half-empty. He was talking to Albert, and I had entered during one of the long, meditative pauses in the conversation. He pulled at a clay pipe with a shortened stem; the smoke came with an air of dejected disgust out of his down-curved mouth. He lounged on one elbow; the hair of his big head needed cutting. He eyed me, and gave me a reluctant good-evening.

I had not seen Sailor for at least four or five years. Of late his visits to the village had grown more and more infrequent. He used to live in the cottage by the pump in the lane called Zeales, with his married elder brother, who owned it. Many generations of Zeales had lived in that cottage by the pump; but being jovial men, fond of company, no one Zeale had saved enough to buy it – if indeed it were possible to save any money in the past, if you were a field labourer with a family.

The present generation of Zeales, however, had produced one man of thrift and ambition, the elder brother. His name was Stanley. He worked hard on his two acres of well-tilled garden, and did various other jobs, one of them quarrying stone for building.

When his younger brother was pensioned from the Royal Navy, Stanley gave him a home, and took him to work with him. Often in my early years in the village, after the War, I used to see the brothers working together in the quarry in the oakwood valley, breaking abroad the ironstone with bar and blasting powder.

Once a month, having drawn his pension, Sailor used to go to the Higher or Lower House with what money remained after paying his sister-in-law for the previous month's board and lodging. There he would enjoy himself in his slow, rather ponderous way. Perhaps he would desire a wider range for his enjoyment, and then he would hire the car of the Lower House, and with the landlord as driver tour round the country to various houses of call; his range of country being bounded on the east by Town, and on the north by the popular summer resort of Combe. On returning to the Higher or Lower House his eyes were likely to be slightly bloodshot, his dark hair ruffled, his speech slower, and the 'Heys?' accompanying his heavy repetitions more frequent. In the village expression, he was mazed drunk – a good-natured, lumpy sort of drunk.

Towards the end of his motor touring, when the constant spirituous stimulation had worn the nerves of his driver to the point of irritability and rage, Sailor was liable to be quarrelled with, and then he swore all the oaths that had been burnt into him in the glare of stoke-holds. It would be in the bar of the Lower House, probably, and the landlord's wife would exclaim at the shocking words: at which her husband would rise hot with rage and condemnation. Invariably, in these moments, a look of heavy and helpless amazement and un-understanding came over Sailor and settled in his eyes. 'Hey? Hey?' he thickly articulated, on being told to take himself off quick.

'Out of it, d'ye hear? OR SHALL I PUT YOU OUT?' the landlord roared, flushed with sudden rage.

'Hey? Right. Hey? I'll go, 'at please ye? Hey? Hey? Certainly. I'll go. I'm as good a man as you are, hey? Hey?' And Sailor's big semi-shaven face swung round with an expressionless stare of brown, bloodshot eyes, and he remained where he was a few moments; until, getting all his body into the control of his mind, he would express himself unconsciously by the working of his mouth; and suddenly a squirt of brown saliva left his lips and splayed itself neatly on the floor. 'Ye want me to go, hey? Is that it? Hey? All right.'

Gathering himself upright, he pulled open the door with a crash, and lurched off the threshold.

Sometimes his brother Stanley would have a few pints with him. They seldom spoke to each other in the inns, like most – if not all – of the brothers in village families when up to pub. In drink, the elder brother was sharper, angrier, like a bramble talon which his nose resembled. One Saturday evening, some years before, I had told him, in casual conversation in the Higher House, that I disliked eating meat, chiefly because nearly all the meat in the village seemed to be that of very old cows, and he invited me to go home with him after closing time, and have supper with him. His wife, he said, was a proper little cook, and no one wouldn't want for a better bit of beef in all the parish.

The four of us – Stanley, his wife, Sailor and I – sat down to table about half-past ten of that Saturday night. The brothers had had a fair quantity of beer in the Higher and Lower houses – perhaps a dozen pints each. In addition, Sailor had brought home two quart bottles of ale. His monthly celebration – they were as regular as the spring tides at the full of the moon – was almost at the ebb; within two days he would be working again with the iron bar in the quarry at Anneswell. He began to sing, and Mrs. Zeale said,

'Oh, stop your rattle, Sailor! Us don't want all the neighbours to know you'm mazed drunk. And before Mr. Williamson, too!'

'Hey?' said Sailor, thrusting his head sideways at

his sister-in-law, and partly closing the near eye, 'Hey? Can't a chap enjoy hisself, hey? When he likes? Hey? And Mr. Williamson, I've heard him zinging before now.'

'Aw, don't begin it all over again. Us don't want no more trouble. Us'v had enough. Why don't you shave yourself, going about like a proper old moucher, you be.'

'Moucher, hey? Moucher? Can't a chap——'

'Don't say naught about it!' suddenly cried his brother, regarding him sharply. 'Don't say naught about it, my friend. Us'v just about had enough of your rattle!'

'Hey? Rattle, hey? Me hey? What about yourself?'

'Aw, stop rattling, and ait your meat up, both of you,' suggested Mrs. Zeale.

Sailor grunted; then pulling the cork out of a bottle, held it up to his mouth. The bottle gobbled the air, and the beer sank down rapidly.

'That's a nice way to drink with a gennulman present at table,' Mrs. Zeale reproved him.

'What's up with you now? I ain't spilled any, have I?' grunted Sailor, putting down the bottle.

The beef was excellent. Stanley Zeale carved it with care, in thin and even slices, using a knife whose edge he had touched up on his boot, and finished off on the hard palm of his hand.

'My advice to you, Mr. Williamson,' said Stanley Zeale, after the meal, as he loosened his waistcoat,

thrust his hands into the pockets of his flapped breeches, and eyed me sideways, 'is this. You'll excuse me telling of 'ee, I hope. But when you marry, choose a maid you've known all your life. Mind you, don't take the first maid you see. Look around a bit, until you find one that will suit 'ee best. That's my advice, if you'll excuse me telling of 'ee.'

Sailor grunted, and turned the quid of tobacco in his mouth.

'Now take the case of 'Liza,' Stanley Zeale jerked a thumb out of his pocket, and then re-inserted it. 'There's as neat a little woman as ever boiled a tettie. Me and 'Liza have never had a bad word between us since we were boy and maid to school together. I won't say,' he added meaningly, 'that we aren't better off together when we're alone in our own house.'

Sailor grunted again, and squirted skilfully between the bars of the black and shining kitchen range.

'Aw, stop it, you two, do,' said Mrs. Zeale. Having cleared the plates into the backhouse, she was now sitting on a chair before us, upright in her corsets, like a big doll filled with passive kindness. She sat quite still, attentive to and pleased by every word and gesture of her husband. Her feet were close together. In imagination I saw her as a good little maid, quiet and neat, that had sat by and watched the virile Stan fighting or kicking his boots

out on stones in the worn playground: who had grown tall, and had filled with love for him, and married him: and all the while she had been the same little maid, always doing what she had been told to do. The grandfather clock in the corner ticked on unsteadily; it was half-past eleven. I was about to get up in preparation for departure, when my host addressed me in a way that was both significant and a little disconcerting.

'Personally,' said Stanley Zeale, looking sideways at me, 'Personally, Mr. Williamson, I like a neat home, and everything regular. But when you've got someone always about who doesn't care a —— for tidiness, well, personally – I'm telling *you*, mind – personally, I don't care very much for that someone.'

'Hey? You don't ever take a drop yesself, hey? Now and again? Hey?'

The elder man went on in an ominously quiet voice: 'Even – even – I'm telling you, mind – if that person were my own brother, I'd still say the same thing. Me and 'Liza are perfectly happy by ourselves. Isn't that so, 'Liza?'

'Yes,' said Mrs. Zeale, 'but don't keep on so, you two.'

'Who's keepin' on? Hey? D'yer think I care a —— what's being said just now? I have a drink sometimes, but I allus pays my own way. Isn't that so? Can anyone say anything against that?'

'Don't you worry yourself about that, midear.

There's something coming to you very soon, that's all I say at the moment.'

Sailor grunted again, and then turned to me.

'You know about birds, don't you, Mr. Williamson?'

I was about to say, 'Not much'; but he went on:

''Ow is it a goldfinch with white legs will allus build in a pear-tree, hey? And a goldfinch with black legs will allus build in a blackthorn tree? Hey? Can you tell me that, hey? And why is it that goldfinches that build in a pear-tree allus makes the best singers? Hey? Can ye answer that?'

His gaze made me feel uncomfortable; but before I could reply that I didn't know,

'The subject ain't exactly goldfinches,' said Stanley, filling his pipe; and the flare of the match revealed a sardonic expression on his dark face.

'Can't I ask a question if I like, tho'?'

'You can ask as many bliddy questions as you like, midear. I'm saying naught against that.'

'Well then, what's all the —— trouble all about, tho'?'

'Oh!' exclaimed Mrs. Zeale, her eyes and mouth and face all becoming round.

'If you want to use that sort of filthy language you can, but NOT IN MY HOUSE, d'ye hear? Is that plain? Or shall I have to put you out?'

'Put me out, hey? It would take a man to do that, I'm telling you. But it would take a better man than you to do it, hey?'

'Aw, stop it,' suggested the amiable and pretty Mrs. Zeale.

Stanley Zeale glanced at his wife. 'You think you're someone, don't you, my girl?'

'Aw, you'm both mazed drunk, that's the trouble with you. You ought to be ashamed, both of you, talking like that before Mr. Williamson.'

'Well, it's you I'm thinking of most, midear. You'm of a mind with me about your own house, I fancy.'

'There's times for everything.'

Stanley Zeale leaned forward, took the pipe from his mouth, and said unexpectedly:

'Well, then, it's time for Mr. Williamson to see your beautiful hair, midear.'

Sailor grunted and spat, and reached over for the bottle.

'Come on, midear, don't 'ee be shy. It isn't the first time Mr. Williamson's seen a woman's long hair, I'm thinking. Mind you, I'm not giving no names, but that's what I'm thinking. What was it poor old Tom Fissick used to say? "Over them boogerin bannisters next time," wasn't it? But there, us'll say naught about it.'

Mrs. Zeale giggled. I tried to accommodate my expression to the occasion. After further encouragement from her husband, Mrs. Zeale put her hand to the round loaf-shaped mass of hair at the back of her head, pulled out some hair-pins, and put them, one after another, between her lips.

While she was doing this, Sailor swung his head at me, and said, with a series of grunts,

'I axed a civil question, didn't I, hey? Do you consider I axed a civil question?'

'About the goldfinches?'

'Certainly, about the goldfinches. I thought as how you would be interested.'

'I am, Sailor.'

He moved his head up and down slowly, while shifting the quid in his mouth. 'That's all I want to know. You got me? Hey? I'm asking just that one question, understand.'

'Why are you so interested in goldfinches all of a sudden, tho'?' enquired his brother, in a manner that seemed to me to hold an almost sinister intentness. 'Trying to talk big, is that it?'

'Well,' said Sailor, making a whirlpool of the tobacco juice in his mouth, and speaking to me, 'Well, that's my experience, Mr. Williamson. A goldfinch with white legs will allus build in a pear-tree.' He belched, spat, and seized the bottle. After a long pause he added, holding the bottle in his hand, his weary eyes staring unseeing before him. 'And a – hic – goldfinch with black legs will allus build in a blackthorn tree.'

Mrs. Zeale shook her hair free, and smiled bashfully. She sat still on her chair, obedient and expectant, her feet close together.

'There, what d'ye think of that, eh? Idden it butiful hair? I wager you won't find a better head

of hair in all the parish, not even if you was to include the gentry, neither! Stand up, 'Liza, and turn round.'

Mrs. Zeale stood up and turned round. The hair hung to her waist, the colour of wheaten straw. Once, I could imagine, it had looked like a sheaf of reed motts still warm with the light and colour of the sun – the unbruised wheaten stalks used for thatching – but time had used his flail, and the straw-coloured hair was thin, dislustred. As though reading my thoughts, Mrs. Zeale turned round and said, 'Aw, tidden nothing now to what it was when I was a maid.'

Sailor grunted, and stretched out his huge brown hand, with its swollen fingers, chipped and scaly, and grabbed the bottle.

'Aiy,' he said, sucking his upper lip. 'A goldfinch with white legs will allus build in a pear-tree. Am I right, Mr. Williamson?'

'I don't know. I expect you're right. The only nests I've found have been in apple trees and sycamores and elms – high up on the slender branches. Last year, I——'

I could see that he was not listening.

'Am I right, 'Liza? Hey? Can you answer that one? Hey? A goldfinch with white legs will allus——'

'Aw, stop it, Sailor. Don't keep on so.'

''Tes a butiful colour on the wings of the goldfinch,' mused Sailor. 'D'ye mind that one I give 'ee

once, 'Liza? Hey? It 'ad white legs, and I don't care who hears me say it, but 'twas the best singing goldfinch in the parish. And it 'ad the whitest legs I ever zeed on a singing bird. Hey?'

His eyes were dull; his hair dishevelled. He swayed, and his lips worked, as though chewing the cud of some far-off memory.

The deeper voice of his brother persisted in my ear:

'Answer me, Mr. Williamson. Don't 'ee think my wife's got the most lovely hair? Can you beat that anywhere?'

'Don't talk so mazed, Stan. Mr. Williamson will laugh at 'ee.'

I replied that I thought it really was very fine; but it must have been 'perfectly marvellous' (unconsciously I used a modern, usually meaningless, slang phrase) about the time that Mrs. Zeale was married.

'My friend, you've said it!' cried Stanley Zeale, his dark eyes lighting up, but sinister still in the intensity of his expression. Was it the light of a long-smouldering jealousy? I glanced at Sailor, who was leaning forward, nodding to the clock, and blinking his ox's eyes. Did Stanley Zeale read my thoughts? Probably not, for his face was still darkly lit by an inner exultation. He slapped his knee, saying harshly, 'You've said it! "Marvellous" is just the word. That's what education does – the very word for everything. You heard what Mr. Williamson

said, 'Liza? "Perfectly marvellous." I couldn't have thought of that if I'd tried.'

'Per-fer-kly maar-vlous,' mimicked Sailor, and his mouth began working. A suggestion of a smile worked itself into his lips. 'Well, Stan – it's time you cut – 'Liza's 'air off. S' – ol' fashioned, mi-dear.'

'Nowhere in the parish will you see hair like my wife's,' cried Stanley Zeale, grim and dark, ignoring his brother's remark. 'Nowhere!'

The grandfather clock in the corner made a slight whirr, followed by a click; then it settled again to its slow *tick-tock*. It was preparing to strike. Three minutes to twelve.

'Yes,' said Stanley. 'It's nearly Sunday, midear.'

'I really must go,' I exclaimed, rising from my seat again.

'What's the hurry, hey?' asked Sailor.

'No hurry for you, perhaps,' said Stanley, 'but other folks isn't so bliddy lazy, perhaps.'

Sailor worked his mouth, leered sideways, and replied, 'You fancy yourself a bit too bliddy much, that's my way of thinking. Hey?'

'The trouble, you see, Mr. Williamson, is that 'Liza and me gets on very well together, do you see. But when there be a dirty drunken loobey spreading himself about the house——'

'Talk goes away light,' grumbled Sailor, looking up at Mrs. Zeale.

'Aw, stop it, you two. You'm looking black as the ace o' spades, Stan!'

'That's all right, midear. This is between us two – no need for anyone to interfere, I fancy.'

'You think you cut a bliddy fine figure of a husband, hey?' exclaimed Sailor, truculently.

'My friend, be careful! Be very careful! I wouldn't like to say what's coming to you very soon if you're not very careful!'

Sailor put his hands on his big thighs, and nodded, leering, at his brother; the elder man stood over him, like a sickle about to slash at docks. Sailor swung round his head, his lips working heavily at the words he wanted to say.

'You think I'm scared by a lump of —— like you! Hey? Think you'll put the wind up me, straddling me, hey? You can pull the head off a bliddy goldfinch, but by Jesus! you don't put the heavy stuff over on me this time! You great bastard, you!'

'Aw, stop rattling, why can't you?' said Mrs Zeale. 'It's time you was both in bed. To expect sense from either of you 'tes like trying to take a cherry out of a pig's mouth.'

'The bliddy bird was choking itself, I tell you. Are you going to stop wagging your wab, or do you WANT ME TO PUT YOU OUT?' shouted the husband.

'Hey, HEY? By Cripes, you——'

Sailor's voice thickened and ceased, but his lips were working violently. His bloodshot eyes rolled. Ejecting the quid in his cheek, together with a

mouthful of juice that slid and sizzled on the iron of the stove, he seized the neck of the quart bottle and raised it above his head, just as the grandfather clock in the corner clicked and buzzed and whirred, and began to strike.

'You great son of a bitch, you!' shouted Sailor, whirling the bottle round his head. 'Think you can put me out, do you? Hey? Put me out, will you?' The bottle swished near me and I started back. 'HEY?' bellowed Sailor, his nostrils opened wide. The weights inside the clock-case knocked and bumped, and the works groaned before each rattling strike. 'OUT? ME? HEY?' he roared, turning towards the clock. 'PUT ME OUT, WILL YOU?' and he flung the bottle at the square glass face, where it crashed and fell with noise of glass. Blinking and grunting and swaying, Sailor stood there; and then he sagged, and muttering, 'I don't give a flip for no one,' he sat down suddenly in his chair.

His brother, now animated by a suppressed fury and violence that made his muttered words as harsh as the noise of thorns in a fire, went forward and caught hold of his coat collar. Mrs. Zeale cried out to him not to hurt Sailor; her husband answered that he would not hurt him, no, he would not hurt him, O dear no: there would be no chance any more of anything, hurt or otherwise. He would find out that he got from him more, O, much more, than he bargained for.

And the younger man, half passive and half struggling, was dragged to the door, and pitched outside.

'Well, I think I'd better say good-night. And thank you for the excellent supper,' I said, when Stanley Zeale had used up two matches vainly trying to light the ashes of his pipe.

'Don't say naught about it, midear,' replied Stanley Zeale, sardonically pleasant, as he opened the door, closing and locking it behind me.

It was a clear night, with a moon. Earth and sky were silent, except for the wabble of the stream in the culvert below, and the noise of Sailor getting on his feet.

'Fine,' he said, and swayed towards his dim shadow beside the pump-shadow. There he rested awhile, before looking up and saying:

'I couldn't be better pleased, hey?'

He started to walk up the short steep bit of road that led to the school and the sea on the west, and the other way to the moon over the battlements of the church tower.

At the top of the slope he stopped, and fumbled for stick of tobacco and knife. I considered asking him to sleep on the spare bed in my cottage; but at that moment he belched, and I said:

'Shall we sleep on the haystack at the top of Netherhams?'

He grunted, and shrugged his shoulders. 'Anywhere as you likes.'

I suggested I should go back and get some blankets I had scrounged from the Army, and that he should await my return.

When I came back the moonlit wall on which he had been leaning was vacant. I searched around, and could find nothing. Could he have gone back to the cottage? I crept down, saw the small window of the left bedroom lit by a wan yellow opaque square; the right window, of Sailor's room, was dark. I listened a moment, and returned. Snores came from the lime-washed wall in front. A white wooden door cast a narrow triangle of shadow. I opened it, and looked in. I spoke, and getting no answer but a snore and a double grunt, I struck a match.

Sailor was inside, lying on fresh straw, back to back with an immense black sow, asleep. Both seemed happy, so I left them, and in the bright and wonderful moonlight I walked over Netherhams field to Farmer Furze's thistly haystack. I would like to say, however, that it was not I who broke his ladder. Besides, the ladder was worm-eaten, and quite rotten with several rungs missing; and such ladders should not be allowed near romantic trysting places.

The next day Sailor left the village. He returned several times during the summer and autumn, always at the beginning of the month; but after the first two years his visits became fewer, until they

ceased. And now, after an interval of two more years – twice the apple-blossom and the goldfinch song without him – he had come back. Sitting there at the long table of the Higher House, he looked just as he had looked when first I had seen him soon after the Great War, except for the grey hairs now in his head and unshaven chin. He looked lost. Perhaps he had never found himself.

I lingered in the room, wishing to show I was glad to see him, but our talk was a failure. He took gulps of his beer between long intervals of moody silence. I had not long risen from my bed, after a feverish cold; and so, perhaps, I exaggerated his loneliness. This, I thought, was his home – he had no other place in the world. We played a game of table skittles, but he was worse than I, and we gave up after the first 'leg,' or up-and-down pegging on the score board. About a quarter to eight, as I was about to leave, his brother came in, and I stayed.

The brothers did not speak. After awhile Sailor called for drinks all round – six of us were in the bar then. Albert quietly took our orders, all for beer; but when he came, with an extra softness of voice it seemed, to ask the last man, Stanley Zeale shook his head and said with quiet distinctness, 'No, thank you.'

Sailor spat on the floor. The drinks were brought, paid for, and partly swallowed. Stanley Zeale continued to talk amiably with Farmer Stroyle

George about the new cemetery. Both were in agreement about the cunning of Farmer Furze in erecting a house on the requisitioned site, and so not many words were passed. I stood the next round of drinks, and again Stanley Zeale refused. He was about to go home to his supper, thank you. It was then about twenty past eight; and he stayed until half-past nine. Sailor watched him empty his fourth glass, and then moved over to him.

'Won't you have a drink, Stan?'

'I told you before, I don't want anything more to do with you.'

'Hey? I'm as good a man as you be, I reckon. Hey?'

'Us'll say no more about it, midear.'

Sailor stood near him, his mouth working, then he held out his hand.

It remained unclasped.

'Good-night, all,' said Stanley Zeale, and rising, he opened the door and went out.

I went for a walk, for the evening was beautiful over the fields of Higher Ham, with the voice of the corncrake in the tall grass, the white owl wafting its silent way down the hedges, and the sunset beyond the sea and Lundy. As I came down the lane from Ox's Cross, in the dim light, I passed a slow figure trudging unevenly up the hill. It was Sailor. We stopped awhile, but as before, we had little to say to each other; and with a 'So long,' he went on his way up the hill. Having exhausted his

money, he was walking back to Combe, a distance of eight miles, whence he had come by car in the afternoon. Albert Gammon had long ago told me how he had left home as a youth, and joined the Navy; how before then he had been courting 'Liza, but when Stanley Zeale had come home from working on the railway, there had been tears, and quarrelling between the brothers.

'Sailor and 'Liza wasn't so far as tokened, if you understand my meaning,' said Albert. 'But Stan, he was always a turrible jealous chap, and couldn't abide his brother having what he hadn't got.'

He had made plain to me, also, the references to the goldfinch, which had been found dead in its cage – gift of the younger brother to 'Liza. 'I minds the time Sailor got it from Billy Goldworthy's pear-tree,' said Albert. 'Although the tree belonged to Billy's father in they days. Yes, that's it. Turrible jealous chap, Stanley Zeale always was; very masterful in some ways, but no more heart than a goose-chick.'

I listened to the footfalls until they were gone through the trees on the skyline: then the lane was dark and lonely, and filled with the sadness of all human farewells; and I hastened down the hill to the village, longing to see the light in the window of my home, where my little boy lay sleeping.

THE FIRING GATHERER

The last wave of the high tide leaves a wet riband above the smoothed sands – a riband of corks, seaweed and pine bark; corpses of gulls stricken by the peregrine falcons, of auks and guillemots and puffins smeared with dark brown oil-fuel; of sticks, tins, and bits of boxes. At night the shore rats come down to the jetsam, sniffing for potato peel or cabbage stalk, and gnawing the bark of green ash twigs. The jetsam has its human prowlers too, who come for the driftwood for firing.

One old woman was to be seen on the beach (except on Sundays) almost as regularly as the lapse of the high water. She used to wheel a ramshackle perambulator down Vention Lane, leaving it at the bottom of the hill, where a ridge of loose dry sand was piled by the winds before the cottages of the deserted lime-kiln. Then with a sack over her shoulder she would traipse along the wavy edges of the tide-line, her feet sinking in the damp sand. If you followed her footmarks when she had gone home, you would see how one track wandered to distant objects which to her dim eyes had held the possibility of treasure – a broken lobster pot, a

bottle, a paintpot, the embedded roots of a tree borne by floods to the estuary and carried along the coast, a mattress or a straw palliasse, the swelled carcase of a sheep, a ship's fender, a round glass float of a submarine net – which were being rolled up by the waves several years after the end of the Great War. The tracks of feet approached these unwanted objects, and branched away about fifteen paces from them, when the old woman's eyes, sunken in red fallen lids, had seen that they were not firing. Sometimes the footsteps circled an object that had aroused her curiosity: there she had stood awhile, speculating on the meaning or origin of a broken black rubber thigh boot, spotted with red repairing patches; or an oval tin with the figure of a dapper little man wearing bowler hat and eye-glass upon it. She could not read. The toffee tin had been picked up, carried a short distance, and cast away.

So she padded along the tide-line to the end of her daily prowl, a jagged mass of rock rising out of the sand, on which thrift and samphire grew with lichens, called Black Rock, where she would turn back, collecting the driftwood of broken boxes, herring-barrel staves, and sticks which she had claimed by flinging above the tide-line on her outward way. She was a shrivelled old woman, wearing a flattened shapeless hat that might in some past year have been found half buried in the sand. The torn folds of her many hanging clothes

hid her like the black fragments of withered mushrooms. Her voice was a cawing whisper; her hands, with the long chipped nails, were more battered than the bits of roots and branches they grubbed up. She lived in the hamlet with her only grandchild, whose parents were dead, a beautiful fair-haired little girl, thin and shy as she peered through the curtains of the small closed cottage window, her eyes in her pale sharp face blue as borage flowers. To this little maid old grannie gave all her life; every stick gathered and brought home was a token of hope. For the old woman believed that the child's strength would remain, and even increase, only if she was always before a warm fire.

The little maid was usually behind the closed window: for Granmer was 'turrible afear'd' of cold air, and kept her well wrapped up beside the fire. If she sweated, so much the better.

Sometimes, when the sun laid a bright triangle over the threshold, I saw the child loitering by the open door, looking up at the gulls or curlews passing in the blue sky, or down at the fragments of mussel-shells and small brown pebbles set in the lime-ash floor by her feet. She saw and wondered on many things. Even in the gentlest days there was a shawl hiding her mouth, so careful was Granmer.

Once a visitor told the old woman that it was the worst possible thing for the child to remain in a stuffy atmosphere, all her frail strength leaving her

in perspiration; but Grannie would not listen to such clitter-clatter. She set her little dear in the tall-backed wooden chair before the wan yellow flames of the sullen driftwood fire; but it did not improve her. One evening she was 'took turrible bad wi' coughing,' and after that she was kept in bed; and out of this darker room 'the dear Lord took her for His own purpose' soon afterwards.

The old woman pushed her rattling perambulator down Vention Lane as before, except that now she went every day (but never on Sundays), heedless of the stormiest weather. The front wheel spokes of her firing-carrier broke through the rims, and she fitted on the rusted spindles a pair of cast-iron wheels off a lawn-mower, and pushed the tilted perambulator front-to-back, to prevent it tipping out its load. Her outward track wandered more, and she remained longer staring at useless objects; and one day she was seen pushing the perambulator on, or rather through, the soft sand, in which the narrow rims of its tall wheels cut deep lines. She spoke strangely to some children, who laughed at her for awhile, then became frightened and silent, and hurried home to tell their mother.

The old woman was found by the Black Rock, where she had fallen beside the perambulator, and they led her homewards, and put her to bed, and sent for the parish nurse. The perambulator was not worth fetching, but the children had fun with it, pulling it up the slopes of sandhills above the

tide-line, and trying to ride down on it. Then they took it on the harder sand, and left it in the sea; and the tide came in and knocked it over, sands scoured and settled where tiny naked feet had jumped, and silted it up. By chance the waves of a later tide lifted it upright about the same time that its owner died; and in gentle summer weather the odd wheels sank down, until only the handle of iron and cracked china was visible. This too vanished in time, leaving the wide shore to the gulls and the curlews, and the tide riband to the rats, whose feet and dragging tails left marks in the dry loose sand above, where grew the flowers of the sea-rocket, beautiful and sturdy in their native sunshine.

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